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BRIMSTONE BILL'S BOOTY.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.



TURNING FROM THE DEAD MAN, MARIPOSA GAINED A POSITION FROM WHENCE HE COULD LOOK DOWN INTO THE GULCH AT THE OLD SHAFT.

Brimstone Bill's Booty;

OR,

Mariposa Marsh at Dead Man's Gulch.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "THE PRAIRIE RANCH," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TREASURE-SEEKERS IN COUNCIL.

"WHAT do you think of it, Bowen? Can you crack the shell and get at the kernel?"

Captain Charles Cooper, of the Colonial Mounted Police Service, asked these questions, tugging at his long mustache a little nervously as he glanced from the dirty, creased and time-worn paper which lay upon the desk, to the face which was bending over it so intently.

The man looked up, the intensely preoccupied expression leaving his face, as his hand rose in a mechanical salute. He wore the uniform of a private in the police force, but his face and his speech were those of one who was once accustomed to command, instead of obey. Not that there was any lack of respect due a superior; the strictest martinet could not find fault with tone or manner; but somehow this impression struck those who saw him for the first time.

"I will do my best, your honor. It is a double cryptograph, but it has been my experience that amateurs almost invariably leave some clew visible. That once found and sifted, the rest comes easy."

"I have reason to believe that this is very important, Bowen, and you may have all your time to spend on the solution of that puzzle. Of course you will not call in any assistance without first consulting me."

"No one shall see the paper but me, captain," was the quiet, respectful reply; "and when its meaning is once made clear, even I will forget that such a thing ever existed."

Carefully placing the paper in his pocket, he saluted, turned on his heel and strode out of the office.

Captain Charley Cooper sunk back in his chair with a breath that was almost a sigh.

"If Bowen can't do it, we're up a stump!"

"Thar's more dust in the land than ever Spring Steel an' his kind ever stole an' cached," bluntly uttered one of the four persons still remaining with the police official.

"But not to be picked up every day in the week, old mate! Just think of it! There was over forty thousand pounds' worth in a single haul! And goodness knows how many more lots the busy rascal stowed away with the first! Maybe half as much again—a fortune for us all!"

"When it is found," dryly observed a young man, the downy fuzz on whose cheeks and upper lip told of rapidly approaching manhood.

"It must—it *shall* be found!" muttered Cooper, almost savagely, his blue eyes glowing with a covetous light. "I have dreamt over it too

long to give up the idea now. Bowen will solve the cryptogram, and then we will find the treasure."

"If it still exists. If the clew is not a false one. You forget that Spring Steel may have played us all a trick."

"Or that some of his fellows, who were not with him that night, may have known of the treasure, and made all haste to remove it before now."

"Or aven av it is sthill there, that the ghosts av thim the wicked divil murdered may be kapin' garrud over the gould—an' niver a praast among us all to say the bit worrud that 'uld lay the un'asy sowls—heaven be their bid!"

"Or that I hain't got the permit to hunt fer the dust."

From one to the other the eyes of the police captain ranged swiftly, like some wild beast who finds itself baited without a chance to either fight or flee from its enemies. But then he sunk back in his chair again, a laugh parting his lips, though there was real vexation in his tones:

"Of all Job's comforters, you four take the rag off the bush! Here I have talked and argued until the end of my tongue is worn to the quick, and now you are all back in the same tracks you filled before a word was said!"

"We are simply trying to cool you down," laughed the eldest of the three youths. "You are so worked up now, that if Bowen should fail to solve the cryptograph, you would go into an apopleptic fit or turn madman outright!"

"The lad has truth on his side, old pard," soberly spoke the gray-haired man. "You're countin' too much on what may never come to pass. You didn't use to be so crazy fer gold—"

"Because I never had such a chance as this!"

"Yit you don't want to fergit that it ain't nothin' more than a chaine, at the best," gravely. "As the lad says, Bowen may fail. Even ef he cracks the nut, as you calls it, thar's yit one other rock in our way. Ef the boss man here won't sell out to me, they won't none o' us take a step further 'long the trail. An' more'n that, ef I make the barg'in at all, it's got to be did afore I l'arn anythin' 'bout the way Bowen makes out with that dockymment."

"You don't mean that, Mariposa?"

"I jest do, mate. I ain't eetchin' so p'izenly fer to turn from a moderate sart'inty to a 'stronary onsart'inty. I reckon we kin make our pile quicker workin' in the straight diggin's than we kin chasin' wild geese like this treasure you've gone clean looney over. Still, as fur as we hev giv' our words, so fur we'll stick. An' I reckon I'm doin' the talkin' fer the younkens as well as my own self."

Who were these persons, and what was the point they were discussing so earnestly? Let us take a brief glance backward and see.

Lured from the mines of California by the marvelous tales which spread over the known world of the great fortunes made in a day by lucky persons in the newly-discovered gold-fields of Australia, Tobias Marshall, better known to his intimates as "Mariposa Marsh," in company with two brothers, Frank and Harold Freeman, orphans, and Matthew Marley, a

youthful American of Irish descent, left their native land for the Antipodes.

Fitting out in Melbourne, aided not a little by Charles Cooper, now a captain of the mounted police, but formerly a chum of Mariposa Marsh's in California, they took passage on a bullock-dray for Ballarat. One night while sitting around their camp-fire loud cries from the bush alarmed them, and investigation proved that bushrangers had waylaid Judge Henry Brady, wife and daughter, who were *en route* to Melbourne. The judge and his wife were bound to a tree in the bush, their daughter being carried off to be held until a heavy ransom was paid for her safe return. The chief of the bushrangers was a notorious criminal named, or nicknamed, Spring Steel, from his extraordinary strength and activity.

Being released, the judge hastened on to Melbourne to put the police to work, but, before going, he managed to so interest the boys in the fate of his young daughter that they resolved to follow the trail and attempt her rescue.

In this attempt they were foiled by the treachery of a ticket-of-leave-man, a shepherd, whom they were, by a curious chain of events, forced to trust as a guide. They were captured by Spring Steel, and condemned to die in the morning. That same night, just as they were escaping, the bushrangers were attacked by a force of mounted police, who killed all but Spring Steel and two of his men. The chief of outlaws, hating his recent captives, swore that they belonged to his band, and the sergeant commanding the police ordered Mariposa Marsh to be hung at once.

He was writhing in the air when Captain Charley Cooper made his appearance and saved his life. Judge Brady was with him, and the meeting between father and child was affecting.

Spring Steel was killed while attempting an escape, and with him was supposed to perish all clew to an enormous amount of gold which he and his mates had stolen; but Harold Freeman discovered a slip of paper which he had cast away while a prisoner, and this it was which, being in a curious secret cipher, Cooper so earnestly commended to the great skill of one of his men, Bowen by name, as already seen.

Neither Mariposa Marsh nor the lads cared particularly about turning from their original purpose of working at the placer-diggings to hunt buried treasure, but Cooper finally persuaded them to turn back with him to Melbourne, and there give their final decision.

His was an eloquent tongue, when thus engaged, and long before the city of Melbourne was reached, the five persons who composed the new partnership, had fairly settled upon their plans, always providing that the paper found by Harold Freeman should prove genuine, and that Bowen, the man alluded to by Captain Cooper, should be able to solve the secret of the cryptographic writing.

A certain portion of the plan which Mariposa Marsh took upon himself appeared superfluous if not really hazardous to Captain Cooper. But the veteran was obstinate, and flatly refused to have anything to do with the search for the

buried treasure, unless he was allowed his own way in this one point.

"We hain't bin in comp'ny with the police long enough to git hardened to it," the old man said, with a malicious twinkle in his eyes. "The law says plainly that all sech finds b'long to the crown, an' we'd dream all the time 'bout bein' 'rested fer stealin' ef we was to play that kind o' game.

"I kin go to the head boss—when you show me the way, an' who to look fer—an' buy the right o' huntin' fer the treasure o' Spring Steel. I'll pay the sum they ax, an' then it'll be all cl'ar sailin'."

"You might just as well drop the matter at once, then!" growled Captain Cooper. "They will know you have some clew—"

"I'll take my davy that I don't know nothin'—that I hain't the slightest idee whar the gold is hidden. Nur I hain't nuther," grinned the veteran.

"Even so—even if they believe you and entertain your proposition, you will fail. No one has the right to sell you such permission. Or even if they do, the fact will leak out, and we will be watched so closely that we can't possibly do the work.

Nevertheless, Mariposa Marsh persisted in his plans.

It may be mentioned here, that when Mariposa Marsh first beheld May Brady, the judge's daughter, he was strangely agitated, almost fainting away, strong man though he was. On the road to Melbourne he carefully kept aloof from the twain, but his friends noticed that he was frequently absent, where they only discovered by accident. He paid frequent visits to the judge at his office, and one day, the same on which this story opens, when he returned to his young friends, his face was almost glorified, so great was the change. Happiness and pure content shone in his face and out of his eyes.

But he said nothing, and they, knowing that he would confide in them in good time, if what had happened was for them to share, held their peace, asking no questions.

Mariposa Marsh persisting in his—as Captain Cooper pettishly termed it—quixotic determination to purchase the privilege of hunting for the treasure stolen by Spring Steel from the gold-escort, years before, was given the necessary directions, and at once sought out the high official to whom his application would most properly be made.

The manner in which the cunning old fox performed his delicate duty, was strongly characteristic.

He had a pompous Englishman to deal with; one of that numerous class which knows nothing and cares less about America or Americans, judging them all by the caricatures of Dickens, Trollope & Co., nor was his interview with Mariposa Marsh at all calculated to remove this truly British impression.

The veteran had taken the measure of his man before entering the lists, and found little difficulty in convincing the official that he was "crazy as a loon" on the subject of treasure seeking.

He claimed to be a blood relation to Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet, and to have fallen

heir to the wonderful "magic stone" by means of which that genius claimed to be able to discover treasures in the bowels of the earth, by simply placing the stone in the crown of a hat, then shutting out all light by bending his face over it.

Mariposa Marsh exhibited the stone, too, which was no less than a fragment which he picked up while on his way to the Government House. Nothing else was needed to prove him an idiot, and the official deemed it no sin to sell him permission to search for the golden treasure of Spring Steel, and to have all he should discover, in consideration of the sum of one hundred pounds, which was promptly paid over.

Mariposa Marsh found some little difficulty in inducing the official to give him the precise kind of a receipt which he desired, but at length he succeeded, and hastened back to his friends, to report his perfect success.

His last lingering doubt was dispersed, so far as keeping his share of the treasure, should it ever be brought to light by him and his friends. He had told no open lies; he had said he knew nothing of the whereabouts of the treasure, and having paid honest money for the chance, he was determined to make the most of it. For he had now more reason than ever before to wish for wealth. If Bowen could only succeed in unriddling that secret writing!

CHAPTER II.

THE HISTORY OF DEAD MAN'S GULCH.

CAPTAIN COOPER was most delightfully surprised at the result, especially when he read the written document, which he saw would enable them to hold whatever treasure they might find.

"He'll never dare give us any trouble, after this," he exclaimed, exultantly. "By publishing these papers we could ruin his prospects for life! Old mate, you are a diamond of the very first water."

"Or else a p'izen fool, which hes paid out five hundred dollars o' good gold fer a shadder," grunted Mariposa Marsh. "Ef that paper o' hen-tracks is a fraud—"

"But it isn't," cried Cooper, his eyes glowing, his entire countenance that of one almost beside himself with triumph and ardor. "That dirty, crumpled scrap which you laughed at the idea of my saving, is worth nearly fifty thousand pounds—or a quarter of a million of dollars in our money! It sounds better and larger, put that way, don't it?"

"Then your guess was right. It contains the secret of the gold-escort robbery?" asked Mariposa Marsh, also betraying his deep interest in the matter.

"Exactly," returned Cooper, a little more composedly. "I wouldn't say anything about it until you returned, but the man to whom I intrusted that paper yesterday, an hour ago brought me the result of his labors."

"That paper in cipher, when fully translated, gives a brief but clear description of the spot where all that gold, besides the fruit of several heavy robberies of later date, lies hidden."

So saying, the captain spread out the important papers on the table, among them the time-worn and soiled scrap which Spring Steel had

carried about on his person for so long, and all gathered around to feast their eyes on this foretaste of the wealth to which they alone possessed any legal claim from that time henceforth.

There is no need to produce the translation here, since its contents will appear in the proper place.

"We will start from here to-night, to avoid attracting attention," said Captain Cooper, when the curiosity of Mariposa Marsh and his young friends had been fully satisfied. "I have secured three good companions, including Bowen, for we will be going into the very heart of the bush, and it is more than possible that we may have some tough fighting to do before we see the end of the trip. For that reason I thought it best to increase our force. The treasure, if we succeed in finding it, will be divided into six shares, the three men taking one share, and each of us the same amount."

"How about the poor devils who first owned the money?" asked Frank, his countenance suddenly growing sober and thoughtful, as he looked the police-officer full in the eye.

"They took Government receipts for their gold when the escort took charge of it. When all efforts to recapture the money, after the robbery, failed, they were repaid by the Government when they presented their receipts."

"Then the gold undoubtedly belonged to the Government, and since Mariposa Marsh has purchased that claim, paying the full sum demanded, and holding the receipt to show for it, why I, for one, can't see anything wrong in our corralling the dust, always providing somebody don't find it before we can get there," added Frank, in a tone of relief.

"Not much danger of that. Spring Steel died dumb, and as all the men who were with him when the robbery was committed are dead, I don't greatly fear his having revealed the secret to any one else."

"Dead Man's Gulch! An ominous name," muttered Harold, half-lugubrious, as he bent over the translation once more.

"A name that was fitly bestowed," said Cooper, growing serious. "Were I to live another century, I would never be able to wholly forget what I saw there!"

"You have been to the place, then?" asked Harold.

"Once. And though there is little of the superstitions about me, I could most heartily wish that Spring Steel had selected some other place for stowing away his gold!"

Mariposa Marsh looked into the face of his old mate, a trace of wonder in both eyes and voice:

"It must 'a' bin somethin' out o' the usual run, ef it made a mark onto you that hain't got wiped out by this, pard!"

Captain Cooper picked up the papers and folding them, carefully stowed them away in a substantial note-book, which he placed in his breast pocket. Then, with an abruptness that was a trifle startling, he began the history of Dead Man's Gulch.

"Some five years ago, or a few months more than that, word came back to Ballarat and other large camps, that a small party of prospectors

had made a wonderfully rich find some place back in the heart of the hills.

"Of course there was a great rush in that direction. There always is when such a report becomes public, but in this case there was much more truth than there generally is in such tales.

"The lucky prospectors were making their fortunes, hand over fist, averaging from ten to a dozen ounces of dust to the hand, per day. But the gold deposit was limited in extent, and only a few claims located on either side of the original discovery ever paid more than expenses, and as the winter season came on, the majority of the diggers abandoned the Gulch in disgust.

"They were the lucky ones, too, as matters turned out!

"Winter set in suddenly, almost without warning, and with unusual severity. The first storm was one of sleet and hail, the wind blowing a heavy gale, driving the diggers into their shanties, which were poorly supplied for the terrible siege which followed.

"The hurricane soon blew itself out, but the sleet and hail turned into snow, and this snow fell for three days and nights in blinding sheets. And when it ended there was full twenty-five feet depth of snow in the Gulch, most of which had drifted down from the peaks and crags above on either side.

"Not one in ten of the luckless diggers escaped alive from that death-trap. The rest froze and starved to death, for the great mass of snow did not disappear until the following spring, when there was laid bare an awesome sight.

"I know, for I was one of the first ones on the spot, as soon as the Gulch could be reached and entered, in the spring.

"Forty-seven bodies—or bodies and skeletons, for there was more than one instance of cannibalism among the starving wretches—we buried, dropping them into deserted shafts, for the ground was still frozen too hard to admit of our digging regular graves for such a large number.

"Before we left, that place was named Dead Man's Gulch.

"The Government took charge of the gold we found there, and, I believe, divided it among the families of the luckless wretches who met their death in the lonely Gulch.

"Pretty soon strange, unearthly stories began to be told of the Gulch by men who had ventured there in hopes of finding gold, and ere long the place was pretty generally believed to be haunted by the uneasy spirits of the men who had died there. Diggers were beaten and half-frightened to death, if not entirely out of their senses, while two of the more resolute fellows were slain outright. Those who found them swore that they could still see the prints of long, bony fingers around their throats, as though grisly skeletons had thus sought to punish the impious disturbers of their bones.

"Popular opinion said they died by the power of ghosts; I was among the few who laid the whole affair at the door of a gang of unscrupulous bushrangers.

"After carefully weighing the whole matter, I felt sure that some lawless gang made their head-quarters there, playing these diabolical

tricks for the purpose of keeping the coast clear of unwelcome intruders. I repeatedly said as much, but in those days I was only a private on the force, and my opinion had little weight with those in authority.

"Now this bit of paper," and Captain Cooper tapped his breast with one forefinger where the shape of the well-filled note-book could be traced by his companions, "confirms my old opinion, since it declares that Spring Steel selected one of those deserted shafts in which to conceal the treasure he took from the gold-escort, with full directions how to find the particular shaft."

"Not to interrupt you," said Frank Freeman, taking advantage of the gallant captain's pausing to catch his breath, "but wouldn't it be wise if you were to destroy that same document, now that we are familiar with its contents?"

"Why so?" hastily inquired the captain.

"Well, though you are a careful and a prudent man, it is barely possible that you might lose the paper and its key, where others might find it, or—"

"A sly nipper mought rob the thief-ketcher," laughed Mariposa Marsh, a little maliciously.

"Stranger things than that have been heard of," soberly added Frank. "Of course I do not mean to advise you against your own judgment. I simply happened to think that such a mischance might happen. If you were unwilling to trust to your memory wholly, why not let Bowen make a copy of the directions in a secret writing of his own invention? Then, if necessary, he could give you a translation after reaching the ground where our work is to be done."

Captain Cooper appeared a trifle vexed that his prudence should be called into question, even thus indirectly, and rather evaded giving a definite answer, returning to his theory concerning the happenings at Dead Man's Gulch.

"I have no doubt that Spring Steel made his head-quarters at or near Dead Man's Gulch, and played the ghost in order to lessen the likelihood of his secret *cache* being discovered by some greedy searcher after gold. But his party is broken up, now, and I guess we will find the coast clear enough.

"Still, there is a possibility that we may have to do some fighting, and for that reason I thought it no more than prudent to take these three stout fellows along. They are ghost-proof, and would not hesitate to tackle Satan himself, if I were to give them the word!

"Well, we have discussed the preliminaries about enough, and it is time I was setting about business. You, especially, Mariposa, must keep quiet, and not stir outside more than is strictly necessary. It is barely possible that your bargain may get wind, and in these times, there is no scheme too wild and improbable to lack followers."

Captain Cooper lost no time in preparing for their long and perilous ride, first securing a month's furlough for himself and three men, then getting good horses, a plentiful supply of provisions, with other sundries such as might be needed; then, in the middle of the night, the little band of treasure-seekers rode silently out of the city, heading for the far-away Dead Man's Gulch.

CHAPTER III.

AN ENTHUSIASTIC GREENHORN.

To the best of their belief, they had left the city of Melbourne far behind them without arousing any suspicion of the purpose they really had in view. Even if their midnight departure had been noticed by any person in particular, the chances were greatly in favor of the movement being connected wholly with police matters.

And as time passed on without their being overtaken by any one from the city, this belief grew into a certainty, and the spirits of Captain Cooper were raised in due proportion.

For the first three days there was no incident worthy of special note, but the fourth day was fated to prove an exception.

At a rough estimate, they were about fifty miles from Dead Man's Gulch, but this was the measurement across country, not by the route necessary to be followed by the horsemen. Considering the many *detours* they would be forced to make, with the crooks and curves of the winding trail, that distance would be almost doubled. And even when the trail was at its best it was anything but smooth riding.

"We'd make a heap better time by leavin' the critters behind an' trampin' it on shanks' mar'," grumbled Mariposa Marsh, severely feeling the effects of his unaccustomed exercise, and the chafing his body was being subjected to by no means improved the sweetness of his temper. "We'd git thar a 'nough sight sooner."

"But we can't get along without the animals on the return trip. At the least calculation there will be over half a ton of gold, and though we could lug it over the hills on our shoulders if we were hardly pressed, I can't say I am really spoiling for the job."

"Durned ef I b'lieve thar's a single ounce o' dust thar! It's all a put-up job on the part o' Spring Steel to make fools o' us—to git even with them as should rub him out!" grumbled the veteran.

Cooper only smiled. He knew from past experience what Mariposa Marsh, together with Mat, Frank and Harold, was enduring.

At meridian the four conscripts were only too eager to halt for dinner, though the question of food formed the least part of their anxiety, and the seasoned policemen interchanged many a sly wink as they noticed with what care their allies selected the softest seats possible and gently eased their chafed bodies to the ground.

Thus far the ride had been uneventful, marked only by the querulous grumbling of the saddle-chafed veteran, but the afternoon travel was fated to be different.

Our friends were busily engaged in discussing dinner, when a stranger made his appearance, and apparently unnoticed the suspicion expressed in the keen, frowning gaze of the party, he eagerly drew near, a broad grin upon his homely face.

"You ain't got no more grub then you want fer your own selves, I don' reckon?" was his salutation as he plumped down alongside of them, brushing the sweat from his face and hungrily eying the provisions. "I ketched sight o' you this mornin', jest as I was 'bout to eat

grub, an' started after ye in sech a 'tarnal hurry, that I left my stock o' provisions behind. I couldn't go back fer 'em, or I'd 'a' lost ye, sure!"

"Tarn you have been following us? May I ask for what reason?" demanded Captain Cooper, politely enough, so far as words were concerned, but with an ugly light in his eyes.

"For sure! But it's mighty hungry work talkin' on a empty stomick!" grinned the stranger. "You wouldn't mind sellin' a feller critter a squar' meal, I don't reckon?"

"If you are hungry, fall to and help yourself. Then, if you please, we will listen to your reasons for following us," added Cooper, coldly.

The stranger required no more urgent invitation, but attacked the eatables as though he was well-nigh famished.

It needed not his peculiar dialect, spoken with a nasal twang, to proclaim him an American of that class which may be aptly described as a half-breed Yankee from down South. Form, features, speech and dress, all bore testimony to that fact.

He was tall and gaunt, built like a greyhound. His features were sharp-cut and bony; his parchment-like skin was freckled and tanned; his hair and beard, long and sandy, straight and sunburnt. His small eyes were gray and keen, closely planted together. He bore a knapsack on his shoulders, a brace of revolvers and a knife in his belt, while he had dropped a pick, shovel and pan only a few steps away, when he first saluted the surprised party.

"I'll tell ye all, 'cept only one thing," he said, speaking with his mouth full of bacon and damper. "That is the name o' the man as outt me on your track. He b'longs to the p'lice, though; I kin say that much. He made me promise not to tell any more, fer fear you'd light down onto him heavy when you come back ag'in."

"Go on. Why were you following us?" uttered Cooper, in anything but an amiable tone.

"Fer the werry best o' reasons," grinned the fellow, with a knowing nod. "Beca'se you was goin' to the werry place I wanted to find—beca'se you knowed the way thar, while I didn't, no more than the man in the moon! Them's the reasons!"

"What place? If you are wise, you will speak out, for my temper is none of the best."

"Dead Man's Gulch!" and in his haste to speak, the fellow bolted his food, choking and coughing as though he would go into a spasm.

Thus he escaped seeing the effects of his words upon his auditors, and when he raised his dimmed eyes, red and running over with moisture, Captain Cooper and his friends were apparently quite cool and unconcerned.

"How do you know we are bound for Dead Man's Gulch?"

The stranger laughed knowingly, as he repeatedly nodded his long, horse-like head.

"He told me—the man I dickered with, in the p'lice. Said it was a secret which I must be monstrous keerful not to let leak out, or the eends o' jestice mought be 'feated. That's what he said. Talked slick as a preacher—well educated. Course I promised, but I don't reckon

it'll do any harm to say it here, seein' as we're alone, an' no outsiders.

"Tell ye jest how it come about: Most folks to hum', whar I come from, 'peared to think I didn't hev no more sense then the law 'lows, but then, ye know, a prophet don't count fer much 'mongst his own folks, an' mebbe I ain't quite as big a fool as I look to be! 'Tanyrate, I've manidged to git this fur in the New World, righte end up'ards.

"Course I come here to git rich, same as everybody else, but I made up my mind that I wouldn't rush in with my eyes shet, like a blame' fool. So I watched an' waited fer the good chaine which I knowed must come, sooner or later.

"I made the 'quaintance of a p'lice-feller, the one I sorter told ye 'bout. Smart man, too! Knowed Ballarat, Bendigo, an' all them places was overcrowded. Then the tax fer minin'—that's like p'izen to a free-born American! I swore I'd never pay it, but strike out into the kentry an' find a gold-mine all to my own lonesome self!

"When I said this, my fri'nd talked sorter myster'us, an' said he hed a rich lead picked out which he 'lowed to work up as soon as he could git discharged from the force. I proposed we go in pardners onto it, but he wouldn't 'gree to that. Then I watched my chaine an' got him drunk. He showed me the plan he had drawed up—here it is," handing over a piece of dirty, tobacco-stained paper.

"He was a smart man sober, but a monstrous poor coot when drunk! It wasn't no hard job fer me to dicker him out o' the plan, an' he made it over to me fer one hundred dollars—monstrous little to pay fer a fortin', eh?

"The next thing was to find out how to git thar, an' I must say my fri'nd proved himself a raal gentleman, ef he *was* drunk! He told me to git all ready to start, an' then keep a watch onto you; that you was goin' 'fore long to Dead Man's Gulch, huntin' fer a gang o' bushrangers which was s'posed to use 'round them diggin's.

"Waal, I did as he said, an' kep' a pritty good watch on you, both day an' night, an' here I be, though you give me the slip once or twice, an' 'most wore me down to a shadder in keepin' up, you did travel so pesky fast! An' now, boss, how much funder mought it be to Dead Man's Gulch?"

During the latter part of this characteristic recital, Captain Cooper was closely inspecting the rude chart handed him by the stranger. He found it a genuine and pretty accurate plan of the Gulch, as he could recall its features, with here and there a spot marked as gold bearing.

He hardly knew what to think. The story might be a true one—indeed it sounded plausible enough—or, again, it might be a plot devised by some cunning enemy, who had in some manner gained an inkling of Spring Steel's treasure.

But if the latter supposition was the correct one, what could this man hope to gain by thus openly showing his hand? Would he not rather seek to spy upon them, himself unobserved? Would he be likely to thus place himself in their power?

"If you have been watching us as closely as you say, you must have noticed that we have left the trail we were following, convinced that we have been misled by a false report. And then, we never dreamed of looking for bushrangers in Dead Man's Gulch—as soon think of looking for them in Ballarat!" uttered Cooper, a little puzzled just what to say.

"But Ballarat don't lay in this d'rection, while Dead Man's Gulch *does*!" nodded the stranger, positively.

Cooper flushed hotly, as the fellow laughed knowingly.

"Suppose we don't wish to be followed? What if I arrest you as a spy in the employ of the bushrangers we are seeking? There is nothing to hinder my doing it."

"Notbin' 'cept it be that I *ain't* no spy nur no bushranger, an' that you *be* a gentleman," was the prompt, self-assured response, as the stranger resumed his eating.

"But I tell you that we have already found the bushrangers and dispersed them. You say you are bound for Dead Man's Gulch; then you don't want to follow us."

"Not onless you're boun' thar, too. Ef you pledge me your word o' honor that you ain't goin' to the Gulch, then I'll ax your pardin' an' cut my lucky. Kin I say fairer?"

Cooper bit his lips at the fellow's persistence, but, though powerfully tempted to do so, he would not pledge his word of honor to a lie.

"Now see here," he exclaimed, impatiently. "That friend of yours has played you for a fool. There was a time when the Gulch was worth visiting, and a good deal of gold was dug there; but that day is past. I pledge you my honor that the diggings were stripped clean, years ago. You can't earn your salt there."

"I know," responded the greenhorn, with a cunning twinkle in his little eyes. "He told me all that—'bout the snow an' all such. But that was five year ago an' more. The gold hes hed plenty o' chaine to grow thick ag'in in that len'th o' time. I'll resk it, anyway!"

All hands stared at the greenhorn in open-mouthed amazement as he gave this truly extraordinary reason for persisting. Could it be possible that he was such a fool? There was nothing in his face to contradict the supposition. He was undoubtedly in earnest.

In despair, Captain Cooper arose and gave the word for preparing the cattle for the road. He could not reason with a man who believed gold grew as rapidly as potatoes! But at the same time, he resolved to shake the greenhorn off for good and all, if there was any virtue in hard riding.

A guarded word conveyed the intention to his mates, and mounting, they rode away from the noon camp, closely followed by the greenhorn with his pack and tools.

Had the trail which they were forced to follow through the broken, rugged hill, been in anything like decent condition, this would not have been a very difficult task. But under the circumstances, the gaunt, long-winded greenhorn kept at their heels without any appearance of distress, or even of feeling his powers of locomotion seriously tasked.

For hour after hour their relative positions

remained the same, despite the fact of the horses being urged forward with almost reckless speed, but the nature of the ground greatly favored the footman, and so far from being shaken off, he proved that he had plenty of spare breath, talking and laughing with the various members of the party, telling many a wonderful anecdote of his own wisdom and cunning.

At length Captain Cooper abandoned the hopeless scheme, and allowed the suffering horses to pick their way at a more moderate pace.

Despite the persistence of the greenhorn, the police officer began to think he was more fool than knave, more legs than brain. Still, he had no desire to have his company into Dead Man's Gulch. Even if nothing worse should come of it, his idle tongue would almost certainly let out the secret of the discovery of Spring Steel's golden treasure, and despite the written permit, Cooper preferred keeping all such knowledge to himself.

Meditating thus, when they went into camp that night, he had a long talk with Mariposa Marsh, choosing his time when the greenhorn was busied eating and conversing with the policemen and the three lads, all of whom looked upon the fellow as a crack-brained enthusiast.

Mariposa Marsh was more suspicious by nature, and bluntly declared his belief that the greenhorn was playing a cunning part, either in the interest of bushrangers, who were supposed to have their head-quarters at or near Dead Man's Gulch, or else he had gotten wind in some manner of Spring Steel's hidden treasure.

"Mebbe the dirty cuss thinks ef he sticks to us cluss enough, we'll be obleedged fer to let him into the game as a pardner—he's got brass enough in his face for it!" the veteran growled, with a snort of utter disgust.

"Well, we will take him no nearer the Gulch than he is at this moment," decided Captain Cooper. "In the morning we will take the back trail, and follow it steadily until he is shaken off for good and all. Then we will make a detour and strike the Gulch from the other end."

"Better putt a bullet through his skull, an' be done with it!" growled Mariposa Marsh.

Sanguinary advice, and probably far from being intended to be followed to the letter, but before many more hours passed over their heads, Cooper was sorry he had not acted upon it!

Frank, Mat and Harold, with the three policemen had enjoyed the ride hugely, and still drew no small fund of amusement from the enthusiastic greenhorn. The latter accepted all their remarks as gospel truth, and seemed blissfully ignorant that they were making him a laughing-stock.

Supper was soon disposed of, and then pipes were lighted, but the day's ride had been a severe one, and all were jaded and sleepy. Still, it was deemed no more than prudent to keep guard, and each one was secretly warned by Captain Cooper to keep a close watch over the stranger.

The night settled down dark and gloomy, and

as time passed on, the sentinel began to nod, worn out by the hard day's journey, then finally fell asleep.

Only to be aroused by a loud, angry shout, closely followed by the ringing report of a pistol!

CHAPTER IV.

THE GOLDEN TREASURE BROUGHT TO LIGHT.

INSTANTLY all were upon the alert, but not a little bewildered by the sudden awakening. Nor was the matter helped any by the utter darkness of the night.

The camp-fire had died away until it was more of a hindrance than an aid to eyesight. There was nothing to tell them what had happened save the angry cursing of Captain Cooper, and that only told them the worthy officer was fairly beside himself with rage.

"What's the row, anyway?" impatiently cried Mariposa Marsh, not knowing from what quarter the danger threatened, and consequently in ignorance of the proper course to pursue.

"I've been robbed—that's what's the matter!" snarled Cooper, viciously.

"What of? Not the paper—not Spring Steel's secret?" persisted Mariposa Marsh.

Cooper uttered an intensified curse, or rather volley of curses, at these words, for now he believed he understood all that that mysterious assault portended.

He had been sleeping soundly, lying on his back, with one arm crossed over his breast, when something partially awakened him. He felt his arm being moved, and then distinctly felt a hand thrust into his bosom. This fairly awakened him, and he grasped at the hand, partly rising up at the same time, but only to be knocked back again by a heavy blow full in the face. Then the hand was wrested from his grasp, and the audacious robber fled, followed by a hasty shot from the revolver of his victim.

What, with the sudden awakening, the struggle with the robber, and the severe blow which he had received, the police captain never once suspected the real aim of this robbery until the last question asked by Mariposa Marsh. He felt now that his note-book was gone, and with it the directions where and how to find the golden treasure of Spring Steel.

Mariposa Marsh needed no other answer to his question than the furious oaths of his maddened friend, and hastily flung a handful of dry brush upon the smoldering fire, causing it to blaze up freely, throwing a lurid glow over the little encampment.

It caused the veteran no surprise when the renewed light failed to discover the gaunt form of the "greenhorn," for he felt sure that the fellow was at the bottom of the affair.

"That p'izen critter did it—look out fer the hosses, that he don't run them off."

There was no need for more definite orders. Every one present by this time comprehended the facts of the case, and knew that the "greenhorn" had outwitted them all.

"It may not be too late—divide and try to take him, dead or alive!" cried Captain Cooper, wild with rage. "Fifty pounds out of my own pocket for the man who catches him!"

"Hold! don't be a 'tarnal fool!" cried Mariposa Marsh, still more sharply. "The p'izen imp ain't alone in this business. Let 'em get us scattered once in the dark, an' wuss 'll come of it then a bloody nose! We cain't do nothin' afore daylight."

"Before that time he'll be miles away, and in full possession of our secret!"

"That cain't be helped now," was the dry response as the veteran scattered the blazing brush, and thus subdued the glow that otherwise might prove dangerous. "We couldn't ketch the feller onless we hed the nose of a houn' an' the legs of a deer. We mought pass him by 'ithin arm's-length in this dark, an' never know that he was laughin' at us. Besides, ef he an' his mates mean mischief, they could easy scoop us in, once we was separated, an' run no resks wu'th mentionin' themselves in doin' of us up fer good an' all."

The veteran's reasoning went straight to the mark, and even the irate captain began to realize the folly of attempting any pursuit for the present, under existing circumstances.

There was no longer any doubt in his mind about the stranger's being far more knave than fool.

His story, his actions, had all been parts of a cunning plot to gain possession of the clew to the hidden treasure, and his really admirable acting had been crowned with perfect success.

The night had proven especially favorable for his purpose, and as it had been decided imprudent to keep the camp-fire burning brightly, lest some curious or inimical eyes should catch sight of the glow, no blame could be attached to the sentinel, for that worthy, Bowen, took care to roundly swear that he had been awake and on the alert all the time. Considering the intense darkness, this might very well have been the case, without his discovering the movements of the adroit thief, and so Captain Cooper could only nurse his battered nose and curse at random.

Those were long hours that intervened before the break of day, and to more than one little party it seemed as though the night would never come to an end. But at length the gray light dawned in the East, and Mariposa Marsh made a hasty scout of their immediate vicinity, while the rest quickly prepared breakfast.

He was forced to return without any news of importance to impart, having failed in that dim, uncertain light to discover any trail or traces of an enemy harboring near.

Food and drink were hurriedly gulped down, and then, as soon as the light was strong enough to render the movement practicable, they mounted their horses and set forth along the difficult and winding trail.

Mariposa Marsh was not exactly satisfied with this course, but Captain Cooper was the actual leader of the party, and he would not spare the time for a thorough examination of the ground surrounding the camp. Already the enemy had gained several hours' start of them, and only hard, steady riding could possibly make up for this.

"You're the boss, an' of course what you say, the rest o' us is boun' to agree to, an' to kerry out ef so be we kin," observed the veteran

as they rode rapidly along. "But the course you take ain't the one I'd foller, though I may be wrong."

Cooper only grunted in reply. He was in a particularly sour humor this morning. Not only had he been completely outwitted by one whom he had looked upon as a veritable fool, but he had lost the clew to the enormous treasure which he had so long looked upon as his own. Not but what he knew the contents by heart, or felt any doubts as to his ability to lead the way direct to the treasure hidden by Spring Steel. He had no fears on that score; but the golden secret was now in the possession of one other man—it might ere this be the common property of a score or more besides!

Nor had the heavy stroke dealt him by the audacious robber tended to sweeten his temper, and from time to time he ruefully caressed his battered nose, now discolored and swollen to most uncomfortable dimensions.

"By the Lord that made me!" he uttered, as his horse stumbled while he was in the act of tenderly rubbing his olfactory organ, causing him to bump it painfully. "If ever I lay hands on that long-legged scoundrel, I'll murder him by inches!"

"'Fust ketch your har'," quoted Mariposa Marsh, with a smile on that side of his face furthest from the sufferer. "I wouldn't mind takin' a finger in that pie myself! But that time may be funder off then we hev any idee of."

"We can make the Gulch by to-morrow noon, if we ride steadily to-day and all night."

"The trail's got to be better then this, afore we kin do much night-ridin'."

"It is better. We will pass over the worst of it to-day."

"Ef they don't take a notion to ambush us on the road, when they see we're boun' to overhaul 'em. Though thar ain't much danger o' our doin' that, ef the hull kit is as good on the tramp as our sweet-scented greenhorn!" muttered Mariposa.

There may be no others. He may have been playing a lone hand," suggested Captain Cooper.

"That's jest what we should 'a' found out at the fust jump. The time wouldn't 'a' bin lost, fer then we'd 'a' knowed jest what was afore us. Now we're playin' it blindfold. They may be only one or two, on then ag'in they may be enough to chaw us up at a single mouthful without stretchin' thar jaws over much. It's a p'izen awkward way o' goin' to work."

"Well, it can't be helped now," said Cooper, impatiently. "All we have to do is to make what haste we can, or they'll carry off the gold before we get there."

"Not if we ride night and day?" asked Frank Freeman.

"They will be most likely to take a short cut over the hills. There is one, I believe, but when I found out that it was considered impracticable for horses, I made no further inquiries about it. By that route, if they take it, they will surely get to the Gulch first."

"We'd show our good sense by doin' the same thing!" muttered Mariposa Marsh, adding as he shifted uneasily in his saddle: "Durn hosses,

Mariposa Marsh.

anyway, over sech p'izen nasty trails like this! I'd turn 'em loose an' take to shanks, mar'!"

Captain Cooper vouchsafed no response to this remark, evidently considering that question already decided. The aid of the animals would be useful in carrying away the gold, in case they did not find themselves forestalled by the enemy.

They rode steadily on, with only a brief pause for dinner and to rest their animals, selecting for this purpose a valley through which flowed a clear stream of fairly cold water, the banks of which were well provided with grass.

They were following the old road made during the rush to the newly discovered diggings in Dead Man's Gulch, and thus far had come across no traces of the enemy. Nor did this surprise them. The road had been selected for the passage of loaded wagons, and from the numerous insurmountable obstacles which barred the way, this was very crooked, at times almost doubling back upon itself in a manner particularly vexatious to one in a hurry to reach the end.

Beyond a doubt "Greenhorn" and his confederates had taken advantage of the more direct foot-trail across the hills, and were now far in advance.

"Still, we may be able to make up for lost time by traveling all night," said Captain Cooper, who was beginning to recover his usual spirits as he drew nearer to their goal, and the painful swelling in his nose subsided.

With ill-concealed reluctance Mariposa Marsh and the three boys once more climbed into their saddles, the brief resting spell only making their sufferings the more acute. Still, they were "gritty," and made but few moans, keeping pace with the "saddle-wise" police captain and his men, nor even indirectly suggesting a halt.

At nightfall they paused for supper, and gave both animals and men two good hours' rest, a breathing-spell which was fully appreciated by all concerned.

Without any further pause, they rode on until nearly daydawn, making fair progress, for, as Cooper had predicted, the road improved materially as they neared the goal.

"The worst is passed," said Cooper, as they ate their morning's meal. "We have only about ten miles further to travel. We have made much better time than I expected, and I shouldn't be surprised if we got there first, after all!"

"Then I've rid my last step fer to-day!" declared Mariposa Marsh, with a grimace of disgust toward the saddle that had chafed him so unmercifully. "Somebody must go ahead as a scout, an' that somebody 'll be me! We don't want to run our heads into a p'izen trap, after comin' this fur in good order."

"It may be just as well, but I don't think there is any danger, even if the enemy have got there ahead of us. We have gained a whole day on the road, at least, counting the ordinary rate of traveling over such broken ground, and they will not be expecting us before night, anyway. Still, they may have a lookout posted to give them warning."

As the end of their journey was so near, but little time was allowed the horses for rest, and

with Mariposa Marsh loping along in the lead, travel was resumed.

When two-thirds of the distance was covered, the cattle were suffered to fall into a walk, while Mariposa Marsh increased his pace in order to thoroughly inspect the ground ahead of them, and to discover, if possible, whether the enemy had posted any lookout, in case they had already reached Dead Man's Gulch.

There was no longer any necessity for extreme haste. If the enemy had won the race, only great care and circumspection could do aught to rectify the mistake. If they were still on the road, then it would be an easy matter to intercept them.

Knowing this, Mariposa Marsh obtained from Captain Cooper a pretty accurate idea of the ground before him, then advised the party to halt under cover until he could fully reconnoiter the trail to, as well as the Gulch itself.

"I kin give you the signal from the ridge up yender. Ef I make a sign so, that means you're to ride right up, fer the coast 'll be cl'ar; but ef I give ye *this* sign, then the p'izen imps is ahead o' us, an' you must *cache* the critters, creepin' up slow an' easy to the p'int whar I'll meet ye."

These arrangements had been thoroughly understood and agreed to by all, before Mariposa Marsh struck out ahead on his reconnoitering expedition, so that there was little likelihood of mistakes occurring. All had been provided for beforehand. Mariposa Marsh was too old and experienced a scout to leave all to chance where so much was at stake.

He was too wise to stick to the beaten trail which, as the only route at all practicable for horsemen, he knew would be selected for an ambush by the enemy, in case they were determined to fight for the treasure. Or if a lookout was posted, his attention would be mainly directed toward that point.

Instead, he took to the hill, dodging and gliding around and among the scattered boulders, keeping well covered yet making rapid progress, his eyes keenly scanning every spot which looked favorable for an ambush or location for a spy.

Nor was it long before the prudence of his course was made manifest.

Mariposa Marsh caught sight of a roughly-dressed man seated in a comfortable position only a few rods below the crest of the ridge, smoking a pipe and apparently keeping watch upon the winding trail below. Beyond a doubt this fellow was one of Greenhorn's confederates, watching for the party they had so cleverly outwitted and outpaced.

"Ef it was only the p'izen critter himself!" muttered Mariposa Marsh, cresting his head like a serpent and keenly surveying the ground between himself and the lookout. "How I would enj'y creepin' up ahind him an' givin' him a gentle squeeze o' the thrapple—hard enough to put him asleep ontel old Gabriel toots his horn!"

From the careless inertness of the fellow, Mariposa Marsh knew that as yet he suspected nothing, thanks to the precautions taken, and as he became satisfied that the man was the only lookout posted, at least in that vicinity, his resolution was promptly taken.

"The boys cain't come no furdur without his sightin' 'em, an' then he'd send the news over the ridge in a hurry. I could pick him off from here easy as slippin' up on ice, but that would tell the p'izen imps trouble was brewin'. No; thar's only the one way to manidge it. He must be 'sposed of, an' I've got to play Injun—steal up ahind the critter."

With Mariposa Marsh, to resolve was to execute; and having already settled upon the route which would afford him the best cover, he suuk flat upon his stomach and began his delicate and dangerous task, without a thought of the peril he thus incurred.

The lookout was utterly unsuspecting of an enemy being so near him, and this fact aided the veteran not a little, since the whole attention of the outlaw was directed toward the trail which wound through the valley below.

Thus it was that Mariposa Marsh gained the rear of his destined victim, his progress being as silent and sure as that of the serpent whose motions he admirably imitated.

Silently arising he calculated his distance, then leaped forward, dashing the astounded outlaw heavily against the rock behind which he had been sitting, both hands clasped firmly around his throat, smothering all outcry most effectually.

Mariposa Marsh was bound to make sure work of it, and without the faintest degree of compunction, he knocked the head of his captive against the boulder twice or thrice in swift succession, until all struggles ceased and the luckless wretch lay a limp and nerveless weight upon his hands.

Mariposa Marsh slowly relaxed his deadly grip, ready to renew the suffocating pressure at the faintest sign of consciousness on the part of his victim, but he had done his work even better than he suspected. That last, fierce thrust against the boulder had fractured the skull of the unfortunate wretch, and it was a corpse that the veteran released.

"I didn't mean to kill him outright," muttered the scout half-regretfully, as he realized the truth. "But it only saved him from the halter—Cap would 'a' strung him up, sure as a gun, ef only to make that nose o' his feel better! The rap I gave him wouldn't 'a' killed a kitten, an' a man with sech a soft head didn't ort to live, anyway!"

The veteran did not feel very remorseful as he turned away from the dead man and gained a position from whence he could look down into the Gulch. The enemy had fairly entered the lists, striking the first blow, and if they had not counted the consequences, only themselves were to blame.

One keen glance Mariposa Marsh cast down into the Gulch, then drew back a few yards, turning toward the spot where his friends were lying under cover, making the signal agreed upon as denoting the presence of the enemy in the Gulch before them. He waited only long enough to make sure that his signals were observed and understood, which was made evident by the appearance of his friends, on foot, leaving their horses under cover behind them, then retraced his steps to the ridge-crest.

Sitting down in a comfortable position,

Mariposa Marsh gazed upon the scene before him.

The Gulch was a wild, dreary-looking place, fit scene for the terrible tragedy which had been enacted within its confines a few years before.

The sides of Dead Man's Gulch were rocky and precipitous, only one practicable trail leading down its sides—that near which Mariposa Marsh now crouched: though the little oblong valley in which the wonderfully rich deposits of gold had been found, could be reached by longer routes, from either end of the Gulch.

But these features did not occupy the attention of Mariposa Marsh more than an instant.

Gathered around one of the ruined shafts he saw a party of men, nine in number, and prominent among them he recognized the tall, gaunt figure of Greenhorn—lacking a better name.

An old windlass had been rigged up across the mouth of the shaft, and even as Mariposa Marsh looked, he saw Greenhorn grasp the rope, while his mate lowered him down the pit.

Beyond all reasonable doubt, that was the shaft in which the golden treasure of Spring Steel lay hidden!

With breathless interest Mariposa Marsh watched the eight men who clustered closely around the shaft, their heads all bent downward, as though the sooner to learn the truth, be it for good or evil.

"Ef the ground would only give way, an' they all tum'le down the shaft an' break every p'izen neck among them, it'd be a blessin' to all honest men, besides savin' us a pesky lot o' trouble!" muttered the veteran as he watched their actions.

Ten minutes passed—it seemed nearer an hour to the watcher—and then he knew that Greenhorn had indeed discovered the golden treasure of Spring Steel, for the eight men around the mouth of the shaft arose from their crouching postures, flinging aloft their battered old hats as they made the gulch re-echo with their wild yells of exultation!

A scrambling sound behind Mariposa Marsh at this juncture, warned him of the approach of his mates, and glancing around, he saw that they had overheard and understood the meaning of those loud cries. Fearing for their self-control, he hastily joined them.

"They're thar, nine of 'em, with our Greenhorn at the head. I settled one, over yender," nodding to where the dead lookout lay beside the boulder. "They've found the gold, I'm pritty sure, judging from the noise they make, but it's down a shaft, an' they've got to git it out yit. We'll let 'em do it, sense that'll save us so much trouble."

Mariposa Marsh saw that his mates were cool and composed enough, but that there was an ugly fire in the eye of the police captain which he did not like, for he believed that it boded serious trouble.

Observing all necessary caution, the party crept forward and looked down into the Gulch.

Greenhorn had just been hauled up by means of the windlass, and the intervening distance was so short that they could see he held a couple of buckskin bags in his hands, and appeared to be talking earnestly as the other men crowded around him,

"Ef they would only git into a fight an' chaw each other up!" muttered Mariposa Marsh, wistfully.

But in this faint hope he was doomed to be disappointed. The man they had nicknamed Greenhorn, evidently held his comrades well in hand, and where an irresolute leader would certainly have fallen into difficulties, he succeeded.

Two men grasped the rope and were lowered down the shaft by their comrades, while one other speedily divested himself of his trousers, tossing them down the pit, presenting a ridiculous spectacle as he strode around in high boots and short shirt-flaps!

Frank, Mat and Harold were puzzled to account for this queer proceeding, but Mariposa Marsh, who appeared to hit upon the truth by instinct, speedily satisfied their curiosity.

"They're goin' to make use o' the britches as a bag to haul up the gold in. The critters is in a hurry to clean out the *cache* afore we kin come up an' ketch 'em at it."

"We'll never have a better chance, either," said Captain Cooper, who certainly was not doing justice to his well-earned reputation for shrewdness and cool daring in this adventure, simply because he was under the spell of the gold demon. "There are only seven to our eight, now, for the two men down the shaft don't count, since they can't very well get out unless we let them. We can charge in upon them and frighten them off—or if they show fight, we can easily whip them!"

Something of this kind Mariposa Marsh had expected ever since he saw that ugly light in the eyes of his old mate, and knowing how little reasoning would avail, he had busied his brain in the endeavor to make the most of their advantage.

"We'd do better to wait ontel kiver o' night," he responded, "but I know what you be when you once git your mind sot onto a thing—it's do or bu'st with you, then!"

"By takin' our time an' usin' some trouble, I reckon we kin git down into the Gulch without showin' ourselves. The p'izen critters won't keep a overly sharp lookout, fer they'll 'pend mostly on that dead man to give 'em warnin' in time. An' once at the bottom, we kin git the drop onto 'em, an' they'll knuckle onder, then."

Mariposa Marsh was not nearly as confident as his words would seem to indicate, but his plan appeared to offer a better chance of success than that proposed by Captain Cooper.

No time was lost in putting it into execution, though their progress was naturally slow enough, since they felt the necessity of keeping their advance well covered, and before they gained the bottom of the slope, the enemy had drawn up their first lot of gold. The bottoms of the trowser-legs had been firmly tied, then filled with sacks of gold-dust! The rope was hitched around this novel bag, then raised by means of the windlass.

Wild with excitement Greenhorn and his men dragged the treasure away from the shaft, cutting the strings and pouring out the treasure. Captain Cooper was no less excited, and forgetting all prudence he broke cover, risking his

neck at each leap, the sudden movement taking his mates by surprise.

The rash action quickly met its reward, for Greenhorn sighted his enemy, and raising his pistol, fired. At the report Cooper fell forward upon his face, without a cry or groan!

CHAPTER V.

THE TREASURE CHANGES HANDS.

So sudden and unexpected was this blow that it appeared to stupefy both parties, and for a few moments only, the echoes of that shot, reverberating from the rocky bluffs around the Gulch, broke the ominous silence that followed the fall of the reckless police captain.

Greenhorn was no less surprised than were his men at the abrupt appearance of Captain Cooper, whom he believed to be yet miles distant from Dead Man's Gulch; but quicker than their duller wits, he recovered himself, and on the impulse of the moment covered the form of his enemy and fired the shot that was to be bitterly avenged.

A fierce yell of exultation burst from his lips as he beheld through the filmy clouds of blue smoke the form of his hated enemy plunging headlong to the ground, for he knew that that shot would serve a double purpose. Not only was a dangerous foeman put out of the way, but now there could no longer be any hesitation or talk of half-way measures on the part of his comrades. Sink or swim, they were fairly in for it now!

Still, the outlaws were not a little demoralized. They had counted so surely upon receiving an ample warning of the approach of the enemy, from the lips of their mate stationed on the ridge which commanded a view of the trail for miles.

But this warning had not been given, and their first intimation of danger had been a glimpse of the dauntless captain of police as he boldly charged upon them.

Reason told them that he would not have acted thus, even with the golden treasure as a stimulus, unless he had good backing; but where was that backing? How had this man succeeded in passing by their lookout? Could it be that he was alone?

Mariposa Marsh, the three boys and the policemen, all had been taken completely by surprise, and could scarcely believe their eyes when they saw Captain Cooper break cover and charge.

Instinctively they crouched lower down and lay still closer under cover as the chief of the opposing party fired the shot that laid poor Cooper low, and thus it chanced that the enemy failed to discover another foeman, despite the keen, curious and apprehensive glances which they cast around.

But this situation of affairs lasted only a few moments.

Mariposa Marsh was not a man to stand tamely by and witness the death of a friend and mate without striking a swift and sure stroke for revenge and vengeance.

The echoes of that first shot had not yet died entirely away, when the veteran threw forward the muzzle of his rifle steadily, yet rapidly raising the barrel until the double sights bore full

upon the brain of the cunning Greenhorn, who was still gazing at the body of his fallen foe, as though expecting it to rise up and resume its headlong charge.

The trigger was pressed, the hammer fell, and the leaden missile sped upon its fatal errand.

The range was only a moderate pistol-shot, the weapon was a good and reliable one, while you might have searched far and wide without finding a better marksman than Mariposa Marsh.

Without even a groan or a gasp, Greenhorn fell backward, stone dead ere his shoulders touched the ground, blood and brains oozing through the livid hole between and just above his eyes.

This shot seemed to break the spell which had fallen upon both parties, and wild, angry yells caused the Gulch to ring again as the opposing bands sprung into action.

The three policemen, Bowen leading, arose from cover and rushed forward, burning to still more bitterly avenge the fall of their chief, discharging their carbines, then drawing revolvers and blazing away at every step they made.

These shots were as promptly answered by a rattling, irregular volley from the weapons of the enemy, but little damage was done by those first discharges. Both parties were greatly excited, and one of them in rapid motion, leaping from side to side, now here, now there, in order to avoid stumbling over the boulders and other obstacles which lay so thickly in their path, thus rendering their own aim-taking an impossibility, and at the same time giving the enemy a flying, never stationary target.

Frank, Mat and Harold, as brave and quite as excitable as the policemen, arose from their coverts at the same moment, and only for the sharp, peremptory voice of Mariposa Marsh, they would have joined in that headlong charge.

"Down! down, ye hot-headed critters! Down onder kiver an' make good use o' your rifles! Take turns in firin', an' don't throw away a shot. Ha! didn't I tell ye so?"

This exclamation was drawn from the lips of the veteran by the fall of one of the policemen, who went down in a heap, with a bullet through his throat. A fierce cheer was cut short and changed to a horrible, sickening gurgle as he plunged headlong to the blood-sprinkled rocks.

"Take kiver, ye two hot-headed fools!" screamed Mariposa Marsh, too eager and excited to pick or choose his words. "Take kiver, an' the p'izen imps is our meat, sure!"

Even as he spoke, his hastily reloaded rifle was discharged again with an aim as steady and true as though the veteran was firing at an inanimate target instead of living flesh and blood. Living—but not after that sharp, spiteful report. Instead, a mass of lifeless clay upon the heap of gold—one more victim claimed by Spring Steel's golden treasure!

The warning cry of Mariposa Marsh was obeyed more promptly than he expected, and more extensively than he had any intention should be the case, for not only did the two policemen seek cover, but so did the surviving

outlaws as well, their progress quickened by three more rifle-shots in swift succession. None of their number fell, but two were plainly wounded, though not so seriously as to disable them.

"You lads was a little too slow on trigger," said Mariposa Marsh, with a low, chuckling laugh that sounded strangely enough to their ears under the desperate circumstances. "By good rights we should 'a' bin six to four, with the odds in our favor, an' two o' them four in a trap an' so out o' the fight, 'stead o' six to seven, the way things now stan'. You hed plenty o' time to each one pick your man an' make him cold meat afore he broke fer kiver. But you waited a wee bit too long, an' sent your lead after a flyin' target."

"It looked like murder, and they are white men like ourselves!" muttered Frank, a little unsteadily.

"White outside, mebbe, but black enough onder the hide," coolly retorted the veteran, lying on his back behind the boulder and reloading his rifle with swift dexterity. "The scum an' off-scurin's o' creation. Didn't they steal the paper? Didn't they shoot down my old mate? An' he, though mebbe a little stuck up in his 'pinion, an' somewhat hot-headed, was wu'th more'n ten thousan' sech p'izen varmints as them!"

Possibly Frank thought there were two sides to the question; but if so, he did not say as much, for he could not help seeing how dangerously in earnest their old friend was, and how deeply he felt the fall of his old-time partner.

He turned his head and stole a glance at the figure of Captain Cooper; but averted his gaze with a little shudder as he saw the side of the face turned toward him, covered with blood. But a short minute ago so full of life, and now—

"The man who killed him did not live long enough to boast of his crime!" sternly uttered Mariposa Marsh, noting the shuddering glance. "I only wish he'd come to life ag'in! I'm sorry I killed him so quick!" he added, scowling toward the spot where Greenhorn lay in death.

"Luck!" muttered keen-eyed Mat Marley. "The p'lace b'ys are makin' a move av some sort sure!"

Mariposa Marsh peered around the corner of his boulder with an angry frown; but this quickly died away as he saw that Bowen, keeping carefully covered from view of the enemy, was working his way toward their position, evidently for the purpose of consultation. But the outlaws were also upon the alert, and this movement did not escape their observation.

Mariposa Marsh caught sight of a red shirt as its owner endeavored to secure a shot at the crawling policeman. It was but the glimpse of an arm; but that was sufficient. His rifle exploded on the instant, and a wild yell, followed by a most ferocious cursing on the part of the wounded man, told that his lead had not gone astray.

"Ef thar was only a dozen or two more o' the awkward brutes, we'd l'arn 'em a little o' the niceties o' rifle shootin'," said the veteran with a self-satisfied laugh. "'Twas only a glimp' o' the red shirt I got, but I knowed there was enough flesh to bury a bullet in, an' I reckon I tickled

the funny-bone on the p'izen critter's elbow a bit. The lead wasn't wasted, fer it'll show 'em we're on the lookout, ready to take advantage o' any chainece they offer us."

"There are only five, while we are six," said Bowen, as he gained their cover. "We can drive them out by a steady charge. And we must avenge the poor captain."

"You tried your han' at a stiddy charge only a bit ago, an' what was the outcome! One good man killed fer us, an' never a skin cracked on t'other side!" said Mariposa, sharply.

"We did the best we could, and stand ready to try it all over again," was the calm reply.

"Yes; I ain't denyin' but what you've got the sand. I know you would charge a regiment with fixed bayonets, ef so be you was told by your s'perior officer; but that wouldn't make it any the less a fool piece o' business."

"There is no question of a regiment now," impatiently responded Bowen. "We are stronger than they are, for some of their gang are wounded, while we are untouched. We can overcome them by a stout rush now, but if we wait until dark, they may escape us, only to gather an overwhelming force of bushrangers, and bring them down upon our backs before we can get out of the Gulch with the gold."

"I don't say you're wrong 'bout bein' able to lick the imps, fer I know we kin do it ef we should be fools enough to try your plan. But what would it cost? That's a pint you seem to fergit."

"There's a certain degree of risk, no doubt, but that can't be helped."

"A sartain degree—right enough!" grunted Mariposa Marsh. "Jest let me show it to you in the correct light, an' then you'll see jest *how* sartain the resk is."

"Over yender, onder good kiver, lay five men, all well armed, an' none on 'em so bad hurt but what they kin draw a bead or han'le a knife fit to kill. Afore we kin bounce 'em out o' kiver, we've got to cross over some fifty yards, right in the teeth o' thar weepens. Thar blood is up. They see gold enough afore 'em to make the wu'st coward fight like a wildcat, an' they won't give it up without a tough fight, nuther."

"Now you've got the figgers putt down afore ye, add 'em up. What's the result? How many o' us would be rubbed out afore the fight was over?"

"If you are afraid, I and my mate yonder will lead the way and draw their fire before you break cover."

"An' I'd lick you out o' your boots fer them words ef we didn't hev our han's full as it is," coolly retorted Mariposa Marsh, but with an underlying current of earnestness in his words that told he was not jesting. "You an' your mate ain't onder my orders, in course, an' kin git yourselves rubbed out jest as soon as you durn please, but you needn't count nuther me nur these lads in on any sech foolhardy doin's."

"Mind ye, this ain't sayin' we don't mean to clean out them imps over yender, fer we're boun' to do that very little job, but we'll do it in our own style. Ef you want to j'ine in, all right. Ef not, lay low an' see us do the work."

"If you can think of any better plan than the one I proposed, we are ready to do our share."

"Good enough! But we don't want no more tail-on-eend chargin', It don't pay," said Mariposa Marsh, all traces of ill-humor vanishing as though by magic. "Besides, we kin manidge it easier, an' I reckon you'll say the same when I tell you my idee."

"The youngsters here 'll scatter out a little. Your mate kin stay whar he is. They'll keep ready to knock over any an' all o' ther critters that you 'nd me drive out o' kiver."

"You'll take that side, tellin' your mate what's in the wind, then keep on onder kiver as best you kin ontel you git whar you kin rake the p'izen imps sideways. I'll do the same on this side, an' atween us, I reckon we kin make 'em squeal enough sence they cain't keep kivered from us all," concluded the veteran.

This plan was so simple and at the same time promising such good results, that the others wondered at their not thinking of it themselves. It was almost certain to prove successful, and if the two pioneers were careful and prudent, taking full advantage of the plentiful cover, there would be comparatively little danger attending the feat.

Time was rapidly fleeting, and knowing that whatever they meant to do must be accomplished before nightfall, Mariposa Marsh and Bowen started on their venture.

In obedience to the directions they had received, Frank and Harold cautiously changed their location in order to cover as much ground as possible, leaving Mat Marley behind the boulder which had sheltered Mariposa Marsh.

Considerable time had been consumed by the discussion, and in arranging the parts which each one of the company must play, but after these details were fairly understood, the bold scheme was pressed unto its completion as rapidly as possible.

Despite the care which Mariposa Marsh and Bowen took to keep their advance unknown to the enemy by improving every bit of cover which presented itself, it soon became evident that their progress was not unobserved, from the growing restlessness of the outlaws.

That they realized their danger, was no less plain from the efforts they made to dispose of their daring foemen, dividing their force and discharging their weapons at every glimpse of the two flankers, hoping to pick one or both of them off before they could reach their goal.

But Mariposa Marsh had played the same game more than once, and whenever it became necessary for him to expose his person in stealing from one point of cover to another, his movements were so swift that a better marksman than was among the outlaws would have found it impossible to bury a bullet beneath his skin while in transit.

Bowen, too, proved to be a far more apt pupil than Mariposa Marsh had dared hope, from the reckless daring which he had already shown, and bearing his instructions ever in mind, he also foiled the murderous intentions of the enemy, though more than once his clothes were cut by the hurried shots, and once his skin was broken by a bullet. But this only acted on him as a spur upon a willing horse, making him all the more determined to succeed.

Frank, Mat and Harold, though fully resolved

to do their duty to the best of their ability, even while they felt a strong repugnance to draw a bead upon men of the same color and race as themselves, were so deeply interested in watching the movements of the two flankers, that they missed several chances to make their marks on an enemy.

This fellow had clearly forgotten the position of the lads, or else believed they were all engaged in the flanking process, for he openly exposed his person to their aim while endeavoring to secure a shot at Mariposa Marsh. His front and rear were well protected by rocks, but his left side was now fully uncovered.

Mat Marley was the first one of the trio to observe this and he thrust forward the muzzle of his rifle, resolved to kill the outlaw, though his boyish heart turned sick within him as he realized the stern necessity. But he was spared the compulsory staining of hands with human blood.

A sharp report rung out, and the outlaw tumbled over dead, a bullet in his heart!

A wondering cry broke from the lips of the lad as he turned and noted a small cloud of smoke arising from a clump of bushes near the spot where Captain Cooper had fallen. Nor was his amazement lessened when he realized that the body of their friend no longer occupied the spot where they had last observed it!

But he had no time for puzzling his brain over the marvel, just then, for matters had plainly reached a crisis, and the next few moments must decide the ownership of the golden treasure of Spring Steel.

The bushrangers realized how critical their situation was growing, and knew that in a few minutes more they would be exposed to a cross-fire against which they could offer no effective defense. As a last, frail hope, they began to retreat toward the further wall of the Gulch, where surrounding them would be an impossibility; but this was an extremely delicate maneuver, in the face of men as wary and skillful as Mariposa.

Under similar circumstances, it is much more easy to advance upon an enemy than it is to retreat from them, and so the outlaws found it now. Despite their utmost precautions they could not help momentarily exposing themselves as they left their cover, and their foemen were not slow to improve the opportunity thus offered.

The never-failing rifle of Mariposa Marsh exploded, and one of the bushrangers spun around in short circles, as on a pivot, tearing at the rocky soil with his fingers and biting it with his mouth.

Like an echo came the report of the piece carried by Bowen, and the death of his mate was avenged, as far as one life could pay for another.

This left only two men unaccounted for, besides those still down the shaft, and they, both wounded, arose and betook themselves to precipitate flight, running like terrified goats down the Gulch that had proven so fatal to their comrades and their hopes.

Neither Frank, Mat nor Harold attempted to check this flight by a shot from their rifles. They were well satisfied to be thus easily rid of

the terrified wretches, looking no further ahead than the present, but not so Mariposa Marsh and the policemen. They fired at the fleeing forms, but without success. The two rascals appeared to bear charmed lives, and soon disappeared down the Gulch, followed by curses both hot and furious.

"We'll hear from 'em yit, an' that in a way we won't like!" growled Mariposa Marsh, scowling at the three lads. "Ye hed loaded rifles—why in thunder didn't ye— Glory to Moses!"

Mariposa Marsh started back as though he had unexpectedly encountered a ghost, and little wonder, for Captain Cooper, whom all believed dead, arose from the bushes and advanced toward them, walking a little unsteadily, but for all that, very unlike a corpse. His face was covered with blood, half-dried and mingled with dirt, and altogether he presented a most disagreeable spectacle to be so warmly welcomed by his overjoyed friends.

"Bowen, keep an eye on the shaft," were his first words. "I saw one of those rascals stick up his head, just now. They will be trying a pot-shot at us, if we don't mind."

"Then ye ain't dead? You didn't hev the hull pesky head shot off o' ye?" spluttered Mariposa Marsh, grasping the captain's hand and almost dancing for joy.

"No, I was not touched, though it wasn't his fault," with a glance toward the spot where the body of Greenhorn lay. "I stubbed my toe and fell headlong before I could save myself. I felt his lead tear through my hair as I fell, and undoubtedly that trip saved my life. I struck my head and face upon a rock, and I suppose the shock knocked me senseless, for the next I remember was seeing you crawling over yonder, and a big fellow trying to draw a bead on you. Right or wrong, I picked up my rifle and let him have the contents, under his armpit."

"'Twas a lucky shot, fer it showed the imps we hed 'em foul, an' led 'em to try a change o' base. But it's a pizen pity them two critters got cl'ar! Ef they should chance acrost any o' the bushrangers which the sound o' burnin' powder hes putt afoot, then we'll hev trouble with them yit! Let alone the nat'ral longin' fer revenge, thar's the gold—"

"Let us once get out of this natural trap, and I don't care how soon they follow us," said Cooper, meaning all he uttered, too. "And out of here we must be before dark!"

"Mebbe that's easier said than done," grunted Mariposa Marsh, nodding toward the shaft. "Of course we ain't a-goin' without the gold we come after, an' the biggest part o' that ain't bin brung up out o' ther hole, yit. They's only two men down thar, an' they cain't git out ontel we're ready to let 'em; but ef we've got them, they've got the gold!"

Captain Cooper made no reply to this speech, but coolly advanced toward the shaft mouth.

The action was a bold and foolhardy one, fully in keeping with his nature, for a report was heard, and a bullet tore its way through the clothes between the officer's side and arm, in a direct line with his heart.

Despite this narrow escape from death, the captain never flinched, but flung forward his arm, at the end of which swung a ready cocked

revolver, and sent a bullet into the curl of smoke. But his shot was an instant too late, for a howl of angry fear, accompanied by a rushing, plunging sound, told that the treacherous foothold of the outlaw had given way and precipitated him down to the bottom of the pit.

The captain was still advancing, when Mariposa Marsh leaped forward and checked him with an iron grasp that would not be denied, his weather-beaten countenance glowing with supreme disgust.

"Of all the bull-headed, onmanageable critters, you're the wu'st I ever see! 'Have yourself, now, or durned ef I don't climb all over your back an' lick you 'tel you cain't see!"

"We've got to get them out, and the shortest way's the best."

"Gittin' a bullet through the box whar your brains hed ort to be, won't do it, though!" retorted Mariposa Marsh, sourly. "Leave the critters to me, an' I'll fix 'em."

Without waiting for the desired permission, Mariposa Marsh called aloud to the bush-rangers:

"You two fellers is all they is left o' your gang, an' unless you knock under in less'n two minnits, we'll massacre you, sure's shootin'! Speak up—you!"

"You may kill us, but we'll make some o' you mighty sick fu'st!" came a hoarse, muffled voice from out of the mouth of the old shaft a moment later.

"We'll do wuss then kill you—we'll roast you alive!" retorted Mariposa Marsh. "Ef you pass out your weepens an' do as you're told, we'll give you your lives. Think it over while the boys kin'le a fire. It'll come in play ef you don't give up. Be about it, lads!"

"Do your worst, and be ——!" growled the outlaw. "You mean to kill us anyhow, and we may as well die fighting as with our hands tied."

"Start a fire, boys, while I keep a watch over the hole," added Mariposa Marsh in a tone that convinced his comrades he was making no idle threat. "True as the sun is shinin' down on our heads, I'll roast the obstinate critters alive, unless they knock under!"

Bowen and his mate quickly collected material for a fire, and as soon as the sticks were fairly aglow, Mariposa Marsh bade them fling several into the shaft.

Until this was done, the outlaws appeared to think him jesting, but now, seeing how worse than useless such a contest would be, they called aloud for mercy.

"Throw up your weepens then, an' crawl out yourselves."

This was done, and when they were fairly disarmed, he said:

"Take them britches an' go down ag'in. Finish sendin' up the gold, an' when we leave this place, we'll let you go free with your lives—which is better tarmis then you deserve."

In silence the cowed outlaws obeyed, though one was somewhat stiff and bruised from the effects of his awkward tumble down the old shaft.

"Now then," added Mariposa Marsh, turning to the two policemen, "you go an' fetch up the horses. I reckon we'll be all ready to start on

the back trail by the time you kin git back with the critters."

As Captain Cooper nodded his acquiescence, the policemen obeyed this order at once.

CHAPTER VI.

A DESPERATE EXPEDIENT.

MARIPOSA MARSH urged his two slaves of the shaft to ardent work, and knowing that their lives in all probability hung upon his good humor, they labored as diligently as though all the gold they packed into the novel "bag" was for their own use and benefit.

In less than ten minutes they gave the signal to hoist away, and as the windlass turned briskly 'around, another portion of Spring Steel's treasure came to sight.

The trowsers were emptied of their precious cargo, and the rope once more lowered down the shaft for the remainder, while the new owners of the treasure stood gloating over the wonderful sight—more gold than ever greeted their gaze at any one time during the whole course of their lives!

But the end was not yet. Twice more the rope was drawn up, without exhausting the marvelous hoard, and the excitement of the party was growing almost unbearable, when their exultant fancies received a rude check.

The figures of Bowen and his mate were seen rapidly crossing the ridge, but they were returning empty-handed as they went! Where were the horses?

"More trouble a-brewin'!" exclaimed Mariposa Marsh, in a tone of ineffable disgust, as soon as it became clear that Bowen and his comrade were indeed returning without the animals for which they had been dispatched. "Somethin' or somebody hes run off the hoss-critters! Not that I'd keer much," he added, with a sudden lighting up of his countenance, "ef I only knowed that durned, sor-starned saddle'd make 'em feel as sorry as it did me!"

Captain Cooper was too impatient to learn why his men came back empty-handed, to remain where he was to receive their report, but hastened to meet them. Bowen saluted his superior, remembering the rules and regulations even in this emergency, when everything else seemed turned topsy-turvy, then spoke:

"The horses were gone, captain—neither hide nor hair in sight—and only this bit of paper left to tell us what has become of them," holding out a dirty scrap of paper.

Captain Cooper took the soiled fragment and the bold signature first met his eyes: "BRIMSTONE BILL," written in a plain, resolute style that corresponded well with the reputation won by the bushranger who had selected this slightly diabolical *nom de guerre*.

On the paper were these words:

"HONORABLE SIR:—I take the liberty of borrowing your cattle and camp equipage, well knowing that your riding and feasting days are over, and that you will have no further use for the aforementioned chattels. You have descended into your grave, and instead of living to enjoy the golden treasure of Spring Steel, you shall fall a sacrifice to his manes, by the hand of his old-time mate and bosom friend."

Here followed the signature as given above,

and the significant screed was boldly directed to Captain Charles Cooper, of the Colonial Mounted Police.

With a half-laugh at the impudence of the fellow, Cooper read this audacious missive to his wondering mates, then mechanically turned toward Mariposa Marsh for his opinion.

"Do you know anythin' 'bout sech a critter?"

"Nothing more than that there is such a bushranger, who travels under that sweet-scented cognomen. He is reputed to be rather more devil than man, and more crimes and atrocities are laid at his door, than of any other outlaw, unless it may have been Spring Steel, whom he claims as an old mate. I know that there are three private rewards offered for his apprehension, dead or alive, besides the regular government price."

"It may be genuine, then, or it may be only a trick of some common boss-thief to skeer us off from follerin' after our critters," muttered Mariposa Marsh, thoughtfully rubbing the tip of his nose.

"Only for the gold, I would take the trail at once and answer his precious note in person!" said Cooper, his lips compressed, his hands working nervously and the dangerous fire deepening in his eyes.

"One thing is sart'in," added Mariposa Marsh, apparently not hearing the observation of his old friend. "We cain't tote all this gold to Melbourne, nur even to Ballarat, on our backs. I won't make a 'tarnal jassack o' myself fer nobody! That much is settled, sure!"

"Nor will I leave the gold behind," as firmly but more quietly added Captain Cooper.

"Not fer good an' all, in course not," quickly uttered the veteran. "I don't give up a thing so easy when I once set about kerryin' of it out. But we've got to cachet he gold ag'in, in some snug spot, ontel we kin git back them critters."

"That sounds more like it," said Cooper, his contracted brows relaxing. "I was afraid you meant to beat a retreat and let both gold and horses go. I might have known you better."

"I don't say that it wouldn't be the wisest plan, but the best o' us is little better then fools at odd spells, an' it's my turn now, I s'pose. But we'll see the job through, now we're started in it, an' try the metal o' this brimstone critter."

"Yer's my plan, which ef any o' ye kin better it, all right:

"We'll pick out a deep hole in the crick, yender, an' sink the gold-bags into it, tyin' 'em together an' markin' the place so we kin find an' draw 'em out easy when the right time comes. 'Thar's enough britches an' shirts layin' 'round loose to make the bags—"

"What of the two men down the shaft?" interposed Cooper.

"It'd be the safest way to slit thar throats, I s'pose, but that may look too butchery to you lads," turning toward Frank, Mat and Harold, "though they'd jump at the chaine to sarve us all that way. But I don't reckon we need go quite so fur as that. We kin keep 'em down the hole ontel we hide the gold an' blot out all traces o' the job, then we kin tie 'em up, hand an' foot, an' lower 'em to the bottom. They'll stay thar safe enough ontel we git back with the hosses."

"But we may never return—there is no tellin'," observed Frank, calmly. "What then?"

"Then they'll hev all the more time to 'pent o' thar past sins an' git true 'ligion—which they stan' greatly in need of, or I miss my guess," grinned the veteran.

Frank turned aside with a slight shudder of repugnance, but he knew that any remonstrance he might make would be useless, and only create unpleasant feelings. When such men as Mariposa Marsh and Captain Cooper had fairly determined the course they were to pursue, no common obstacle could turn them aside from their goal; and the lives of a dozen enemies would be sacrificed as readily as those of the two now in their power.

Under the circumstances, the plan proposed by Mariposa Marsh was apparently the most feasible one that could be devised, and as he wished to strike the trail of the stolen horses, learning its general direction before the shades of night prevented, all hands at once fell to work, Bowen and his fellow-policemen stripping the dead bushrangers of their garments, necessary to carry out the idea of Mariposa Marsh.

This job was not a long one, as the gold was already done up in small skin bags, easily handled, and a dozen of these proved load sufficient for each garment.

While this work was going on, Mariposa Marsh made good though covert use of his eyes, and keenly scrutinized the walls of rock which inclosed the oval valley in quest of any suspicious object. And the value of this precaution was speedily made manifest.

A short, grating laugh parted his lips as Cooper announced the fact of the gold being all packed in readiness for its transfer to the creek, and Mariposa electrified them all with:

"I don't reckon the job'll pay, after all. They's a p'izen critter up on the rocks yender, which is watchin' us too cluss not to mean mischief!"

There was no need to ask a more explicit statement. As if by instinct they turned their gaze toward the right quarter, and as they did so, the form of a tall man arose from behind a boulder, making a peculiarly insulting gesture as he came into plain view.

"You see?" added Mariposa, with a grim smile. "That talks plainer then words, an' says the critter is well backed, or he wouldn't show hisself in that way, nur yit dust the seat o' his britches with his hand so mighty bold. Ten to one that we've let the chaine slip through our fingers, an' that we cain't leave the Gulch, even if we wanted to, ever so bad!"

"There are three ways of getting out," said Frank, calmly. "Up or down the Gulch, or else by the trail, yonder. It is not likely that Brimstone Bill has more than double our number, and these must be divided in order to guard the different passes. We can force our way through them, then, if we only make up our minds to do so."

"Not without abandoning the gold!" muttered Captain Cooper, doggedly. "And that I'll never do, now I've fairly got my hands upon it. Of course, I am not dictating to the rest," he added, in a more natural tone, "If you all

agree that that course is the best one to follow, I'll do my share of the fighting, but as soon as the road is fairly opened for you, I'll return here and defend my rights."

"Whatever else we do, we must all hang together," said Mariposa Marsh, decisively. "It may be that we're makin' a big fuss over nothin', but the didoes o' that p'izen imp up yender, makes me feel monstrous dubersome. Looks like he knowed he an' his mates hed the dead-open-an'-shet onto us!"

"Well, what is to be done first? Abandon the treasure I won't—that is said and sworn to!"

"Nur we won't 'bandon you, though I'm peskily 'feared that this gold 'll cost ye more in the eend then ten times the amount 'll ever be able to pay back. But we 'listed fer the bad as well as the good, an' must take things as they come."

"Fu'st thing—you three boys want to keep a cluss lookout, an' let us know the fu'st you see o' any more inemies. Next, le's git up them two fellers down the hole."

Captain Cooper bent over the mouth of the shaft and hailed the two bushrangers.

"We're 'most ready," promptly responded the fellow who had all along acted as spokesman. "Thar's only a few more bags to pack up, an' then we'll be done."

"Tell 'em to leave the gold whar it is, an' both hang on to the rope, while we draw 'em up," muttered Mariposa Marsh as Cooper turned an inquiring glance toward him.

This order was transmitted to the men below, and was promptly obeyed, though not without some little curiosity on the part of the outlaws, as the expression upon their faces plainly betrayed as they were drawn up to the surface.

"Take a half-hitch 'round thar arms, an' ef they try to play any tricks, tickle 'em with your knives, hilt deep," said Mariposa Marsh in a tone that none could doubt was perfectly sincere. "The rest o' ye keep a cluss lookout, an' call me if I'm needed in a hurry."

While speaking, the veteran lowered the rope down the shaft to its full extent, then grasped the cord with hands and knees, allowing himself to slip steadily down the pit.

The meaning of all this was an enigma to Mariposa's comrades, but he possessed their full confidence, and they knew that he was working for the common good. Still their curiosity did not prevent them from obeying his orders and keeping a close lookout in every direction, and their blood flowed more quickly as they caught sight of the spy on the hilltop making various slow but emphatic gestures, apparently signaling to his mates.

That this was the fact, was only too speedily made manifest by the appearance of several human beings at each end of the oblong valley, as well as upon the hill where the trail crossed it. How strong these forces were, could only be surmised, for the enemy kept themselves covered as completely as possible, while slowly but surely drawing toward a common center which, almost as a matter of course, was the shaft beside which our friends were now stationed.

The two captive bushrangers were not the last to remark this new phase of affairs, and

that they confidently believed they would reap the benefit of any change was plain enough.

"Don't you think it!" said Bowen in an ominous mutter as he read their hopes in their brightening faces. "If an army of your kidney were to come into this Gulch for the express purpose, they would rescue only your dead bodies. The first shots that are fired, kills you!"

Matters were growing critical enough, and in obedience to the instructions he had received, Cooper called out to Mariposa Marsh to make haste. Almost instantly the rope was shaken violently, and the three lads plied the windlass rapidly until the veteran once more stood above ground. A few words put him in possession of the facts, then Cooper added:

"We can carry the gold across to the rock wall, yonder, and there make a fight until—"

"Ontel we git rubbed out—jes' so!" coolly interrupted Mariposa. "In two ways they could do it, an' need never burn a grain o' powder. One is to lay low ontel we starve out fer want o' grub, an' water to drink. The other—see them rocks up on the hill, yender? Jest set 'em a-goin', an' how long would it be afore we was all mashed to a jelly? Not hafe an hour, at the very outside!"

"We could make a charge if matters grew desperate—"

"An' be knocked over, one by one, before we could pull trigger on a inemy. That would be a fit endin' to the hull durned-fool business; but I don't want any in mine, thank ye."

"What else can we do?" sullenly demanded Cooper. "In ten minutes more those devils will be in position to open fire on us. Stay here, and be shot down like hogs in a pen?"

"You all know I never lie, nur say a thing I don't mean when I'm talkin' in sober airnest," said Mariposa Marsh, now speaking with rapid distinctness. "I hain't got no time to s'plain it all, now, nur it wouldn't be wise to do so afore them critters," glancing toward the two prisoners, who were eagerly listening to his words. "But I'm willin' to pledge you my word o' honor that I kin see my way cl'ar through the scrape, p'izen nasty though it looks at the fu'st glance. Promise to kerry out my orders without hesitation or axin' any questions fer the present, an' all will go well yit. You hev my word o' honor to that effec'!"

"Tell us what to do and we'll do it if three boys can," simply said Frank Freeman, and that he spoke for all was clear from the manner in which Mat and Harold ranged alongside.

"Go take them blankets and soak 'em as full o' crick water as they'll hold," said Mariposa Marsh.

The prompt obedience of the three lads was not without its influence over Captain Cooper, who had been too long used to commanding to find unquestioning obedience easy, but he, too, had great faith in his old mate, and announced his readiness to trust him without words or explanation.

Of course, this submission included that of the two policemen, who were in duty bound to follow wherever their chief led, and Mariposa Marsh immediately set them to work.

"You," indicating Bowen, "take one o' them critters an' go down the shaft. Stop at the place whar they tuck the gold out of, an' be ready to stow away the dust as we lower it."

His instructions were promptly obeyed, and as the three lads now returned with the blankets thoroughly saturated, Mariposa Marsh gave them their orders, thus being himself left at liberty to keep the enemy from stealing up too close for safety, which he did by one or two well-directed shots which, though doing little injury, since the outlaws kept closely covered, served his purpose by warning them of what the slightest exposure might result in.

Meanwhile Cooper, James, the second policeman, and the three lads, aided by Bowen below, quickly lowered the packages of gold, one after another, following them with the wet blankets.

"Now tell Bowen to be on the lookout, an' to be ready to stop ye at the hole," muttered Mariposa Marsh.

He was growing a little anxious now, for he knew that the crisis was close at hand. Naturally the enemy would grow bolder in proportion as the force opposed to them above-ground grew less strong, and a well-directed charge at the critical moment might ruin everything. Still, that danger must be run, and he was not entirely without hope, since the enemy must naturally be not a little puzzled by their truly strange proceedings, and might suspect the presence of a cunning trap. If so they would be guarded in their approach, and all might yet turn out well.

James and Harold were the first to grasp the rope and swing over the dark mouth of the pit, being rapidly lowered to the level in which the gold had been found. Then Frank and Mat were sent down in the same manner.

"Ontie the rope an' hang it double over the drum, then shin down as fast as the law 'lows ye!" muttered Mariposa Marsh, his uneasiness increasing as he saw a more unequivocal bustle among the enemy, as though they had at length wrought their courage up to the charging point.

Captain Cooper was far from being satisfied by thus having to act blindfolded, as it were, but he was wise enough to see that any discussion now could only result in their destruction, and obeyed orders with a rapid dexterity, hanging the rope as directed, then bidding the second prisoner descend into the pit, enforcing his commands by a show of his pistol.

The wretch doubtless felt that it was hard to be thus forced away from the approach of those who would naturally be his friends when they came to understand his story, but he could read human nature plain enough to see that resistance on his part would be rewarded with instant death, and life was too sweet for him to throw away, even under such humiliating circumstances. So, grasping the rope, he rapidly descended.

"Quick! down with ye!" grated Mariposa Marsh, his eyes aglow as he swiftly leveled his rifle and sent a bullet crashing through the brain of an enemy who was endeavoring to perform the same feat for one of the twain still remaining above ground. "The p'izen imps air comin'!"

"Follow me at once, or I'll return and share

your fate, old mate!" he muttered in an earnest tone as he grasped the doubled rope and swung himself over the opening.

There was no real necessity for this warning. Mariposa Marsh knew that he had already done his share of the work—all that a single man could do—and though brave even to the verge of recklessness when there was anything to be gained by such a course, he was not a man to run any unnecessary risk through pure bravado, or to throw away his life while a chance for preserving it remained.

So, slinging his rifle over his shoulders by the strap attached, he grasped the rope as soon as the captain had descended sufficiently far to permit him, and in ten seconds more was on the level below, swiftly pulling down the rope which had stood them in such good stead, expecting with every instant to feel it grasped from above by the baffled enemy.

This, however, did not occur, for an all-sufficient reason.

If his own party were amazed and at a loss to account for the strange proceedings inaugurated by Mariposa Marsh, placing them, as it appeared, in a trap from which there was absolutely no chance of escape or of defeating the enemy by either fighting or stratagem, the outlaws were no less so.

Had they known the exact truth, they would have ere this done what Mariposa Marsh feared they would do—made a simultaneous charge upon the divided force, and thus insure their own success, even though it should cost them a life or two. That risk such men are always ready to run when any coveted reward is to be obtained, and so they would have acted beyond a doubt had they known for certain that our friends were really descending the shaft. But this idea appeared such rank folly to them that it was instantly banished.

They could only account for the maneuver by believing the adventurers were trying to lure them into some trap, in reality lying in ambush among the scattered stones and clumps of shrubbery which surrounded the shaft, hoping thus to equalize forces by one deadly volley.

Under this delusion they suffered the golden opportunity to slip through their fingers, nor were they undeceived until the spy whom they had stationed upon the highest point of the rocks overlooking the valley, and whose elevated position enabled him to more exactly note the movements of our friends, descended from his perch and breathlessly rejoined them, indignantly pointing out the error into which they had fallen.

Even then they were not fully convinced, being unable to understand why their intended victims should pursue such an extraordinary course, when they could far more easily have betaken themselves to some one of the rocky niches in the wall, where they might have made a stout fight for life before succumbing to the inevitable. Nor did they advance freely and without trepidation until the spy boldly strode up to within a dozen yards of the mouth of the shaft, thus showing his faith in, as well as the correctness of his eyesight.

Meanwhile Mariposa Marsh was feeling almost as much uneasiness as were his enemies

above-ground at this delay, which he feared boded ill for the success of his desperate expedient.

Where he had expected an immediate rush, and perhaps a volley of bullets and bowlders down the mouth of the shaft, all was silence and seeming peace. Still he did not give utterance to his fears, but as soon as his feet were firmly planted on the level, he rapidly drew down the rope by pulling on one end, coiling it up as he did so for future use, since that was an important feature in his plan of escape.

At first all was dark to those below, so much so that they could not distinguish the forms of their closest neighbors, unless these stood upon the very verge of the shaft, or of the level, to be more accurate. Even then, features could not be distinguished until several minutes had elapsed, and, consequently, nearly all were afraid to move, lest they should be precipitated into some unseen pit, or down the lower shaft.

The exceptions were Bowen and the two prisoners, the former because his eyes had grown somewhat accustomed to the gloom, the latter because they had formed a pretty accurate idea of the nature and shape of the place which they now occupied, by their labors and researches while collecting and packing up the treasure desposited there by Spring Steel.

This knowledge may be briefly expressed, being necessary to a full understanding of what is to follow.

The shaft proper was nearly, if not quite, one hundred feet in depth, being much wider at the bottom than the top, and tolerably well braced and shored up by the timbers that had only partially prevented it from caving in. This falling away from the sides in spots, made the opening irregular in shape, affording more than one snug hiding-place in its sides, which fact, probably, was the reason the notorious bushranger selected this particular shaft for the temporary "bank" in which to lodge his precious deposits.

Still, it was not one of these natural openings which Spring Steel had selected for his *cache*, but a purely artificial cutting or chamber, the entrance to which was very nearly seven feet square, and now quite double that in depth.

The edges of this chamber, though only partially shored or braced, had crumbled but very little, until the rear was reached. There the earth had caved from the roof and sides, running in an abrupt slope toward if not quite up to the roof. But eyesight availed little so far from the shaft, down which the only light came, and this could be judged only by feeling.

What that chamber, if chamber it really was, had been constructed for, only one among the party could have told, while the rest, in their natural anxiety, did not give the matter even a thought.

Despite his uneasiness, Mariposa Marsh did not lose any time; but as soon as he had the rope fairly coiled up, he urged his friends to work, setting the example himself.

"Drag the bundles o' gold back here—stow 'em close to the walls on the side, whar the dirt begins to raise up. Lively, now! 'Twon't be long afore we begin to hear from them p'izen imps up thar, an' we've got heaps to do yit, afore we're ready."

"If you wouldn't be so close-mouthed; but would tell us what the scheme is you have in your mind, or even give us an idea of its nature, we could work to much better advantage," uttered Cooper, whose curiosity was as ardent as that popularly ascribed to the fair sex.

"Time enough to talk when I git the idee fairly mapped out in my own mind," replied Mariposa Marsh, shortly, even then finding a peculiar pleasure in baffling his old friend. "Git these bundles out o' the way in the fust place. Then we want to onfold an' fasten two o' them blankets together, with the other one lappin' over the j'inin' place, so no smoke kin come through while we're finishin' the job. That done, we'll see."

"You think they will try to smoke or roast us out?"

"I don't only *think* so, but I *know* it," decisively responded the veteran. "The little fire we left burnin' up yender will be sure to putt the idee into thar heads, even ef it wasn't thar already. They'll take that as the easiest way o' gettin' shet on us, an' so it would be, ef so be we was fools enough to set still here an' let 'em hev things all thar own way—which this chicken, fer one, don't 'low to do."

Scarcely had Mariposa Marsh uttered this sentence when the enemy above struck the first blow.

Until now they had been kept from approaching the mouth of the shaft by the doubts and suspicions already alluded to, but when convinced by the spy that these fears were absolutely without foundation, they crowded around the opening, though still keeping a few yards away, lest a rifle-shot come from the depths below.

Then the spy picked up a heavy fragment of rock, and cast it into the pit, yelling aloud in ferocious exultation as a piercing scream of horrible agony and despair came to their ears from the gloomy depths below!

CHAPTER VII.

THE DISCOVERY MADE BY MARIPOSA MARSH.

THAT wild, unearthly scream, extorted by agony the most intense, caused the blood of those pent up in the narrow chamber below to fairly run cold, for they knew that it proclaimed the death or maiming of one of their number!

But which one? Who was the hapless victim?

Such were the questions asked by one and all as they glanced hurriedly around—asked, but only mentally, for they dreaded the answer which might be given to the spoken words.

Mariposa Marsh was the first to solve the mystery, thanks to his position furthest from the edge of the shaft, thus giving him a fairer view of his companions, and there was great relief in his voice when he saw that Frank, Harold and Mat were near him, then discovered the truth, crying:

"It was one o' them two critters we fetched down with us—lucky 'tain't no wuss!"

Such was indeed the fact. The larger one of the two outlaws was no longer in the chamber, and as all the rest could be accounted for, being safe and uninjured, there was no reasonable

denied that he was the sufferer, or that that unearthly shriek had come from his lips as he fell a victim to the first blow dealt by his friends above.

He was the man whom Captain Cooper had forced to descend the shaft at the muzzle of his pistol, and was apparently a far more stubborn, reckless fellow than his mate, since he it was who so narrowly missed shooting the police officer when the latter drew near the shaft, after the death of Greenhorn and defeat of his band.

It seems that he was resolved to make his escape from captivity, at all risks, and doubtless fancied he saw a good opportunity when his captors were all busied in stowing away the treasure, and preparing the blankets under direction of Mariposa Marsh. Although the forethought of the latter had removed the rope, the outlaw believed he could ascend to the mouth of the shaft by means of the still tolerably firm timbers and spars used to keep the sides from caving in. He thought only of escaping the captivity below, never pausing to count the peril which would assuredly await his appearance above, since the chances were that Brimstone Bill and all of his gang would fail to recognize him as a friend, even if any of them had ever met him before. But his brain was too sluggish to entertain more than one idea at a time, and believing that all would be well if he could only get started on his upward journey before being missed, the doomed man cautiously edged toward the shaft.

This he succeeded in reaching without attracting the attention of his captors, and was just grasping one of the timbers, when the heavy boulder came from above, striking upon and crushing both hands and wrists to a jelly, extorting that horrible shriek from his lips. The weight of the rock tore him from his footing and bore him with it down the shaft. No further outcry came from below, and in all probability the luckless wretch was killed outright by the boulder falling uppermost.

There was a brief respite while the spy yelled with ferocious exultation, but then as he and his fellows bestirred themselves, gathering stones and hurling them into the shaft, hoping thus to easily accomplish their bloody work, our friends saw that there was no time to lose.

"'Twon't be long afore they'll be thinkin' o' roastin' us," muttered Mariposa Marsh, as soon as the mystery of that frightful shriek was solved. "It's only boys' play now, but they'll soon see that we're so fixed that they can't rock us to sleep ferever amen!"

"We were fools for ever coming into such a rat-trap, when we could have fought them above-ground, in a manly way," growled Cooper, in a tone of utter disgust.

"You'll eat them words in less'n a hour," chuckled Mariposa Marsh, whose good-humor was restored by the appearance of the enemy above. "We'll see then which pa'r o' shoulders the fool's head sets best an' most nat'ral onto—yourn or mine! But fu'st, le's let them critters up yender know we ain't dead yit, or they may begin to smell a mice," he added, cautiously cocking a revolver and drawing near the shaft.

"Say, you!" he screamed in a shrill tone that rose high above the rush and clatter of the

descending stones. "Say—you p'izen critters up yender!"

The hail was heard, for the shower of stones abruptly ceased and a clear voice made reply, though the speaker took good care not to expose any part of his person.

"What are you howling about? Can't you let the boys have a little fun, without kicking up a row like that?"

"Fun's all right, but let 'em pitch thar jack-stones down some other hole that ain't ockepied! They make so pesky much noise we cain't sca'cely hear ourselves think. 'Tain't good manners, an' ef you keep it up much longer, we'll git mad an' won't surrender at all—so thar, now!"

"I thought we would contrive to bring you to terms pretty soon," added the voice, with an exultant laugh. "Crawl up the sides of the shaft, and you shall be treated well."

"Let me see your face fu'st, so I kin be sure you mean what you say," persisted Mariposa Marsh.

There was no immediate response made, but in the course of a few moments, the head and shoulders of a human form were projected over the edge of the opening. Mariposa Marsh smiled grimly as he raised his revolver. He was not one to be deceived by such a shallow trick, for his keen eye at once detected the fact that a dead man had been pushed forward by the suspicious outlaw. Still, he discharged his weapon, then jumped back, satisfied with what he had accomplished.

A taunting laugh followed the shot, and the dead body was tumbled down the shaft; but no more stones followed, and the voice of Brimstone Bill was heard above:

"Stir up that fire! Gather wood and pile on. We'll try and warm those fellows up a bit!"

"That's all I wanted," chuckled Mariposa Marsh, as he heard these orders. "Now we know them imps won't be watchin' us too cluss down here, an' you kin light up your bulls' eyes."

Captain Cooper obeyed in dogged silence. He, as well as his men, had been furnished with dark lanterns before setting forth upon their treasure-hunting, knowing from the description of the hiding-place chosen by Spring Steel, that some such aid would not come amiss, and it was only the work of a moment to strike a light.

The veteran was not idle. By this time the three blankets were arranged to his satisfaction, and these he now proceeded to suspend before the opening, pinning the upper portion securely to the timbers in the roof, and fastening the sides in the same manner.

"That will hardly keep out the smoke, if they set about roasting us out in earnest," said Frank, when Mariposa Marsh gave a grunt of satisfaction as though his work was done.

"It will when we get through. Fasten the light up ag'inst the wall, an' all han's fall to work. Bring them biggest lumps o' dirt to hold the bottom of the blankets firm, then pack it tight all the way up to the roof."

"We may as well smother with smoke as from lack of fresh air!"

"I don't 'low to do neither, nor you won't,

old mate, ef you only fall to an' lend us a hand."

There was a confidence in the tones of the veteran that convinced Captain Cooper of his truth, and without any further objections beset to work with the others.

Nimble as they bestirred themselves, it seemed as though they were to be too late, after all, for blazing brands began to rattle down the shaft, together with woolen cloths, evidently garments stripped from the bodies of dead outlaws, and an offensive smoke was drawn into the chamber, around the edges of the blanket screen. Cooper fairly snorted with disgust, as he noted this, and quit work for a moment. But it was only for an instant. Then he learned the truth, and divined the secret which had led Mariposa Marsh to act so strangely.

The smoke rushed into the chamber rapidly, yet the atmosphere did not grow unbearable, as one would naturally suppose, and between these two facts he made the discovery.

Unless there was a strong draught, the smoke would not enter in such profusion; or, if it did enter, the chamber would speedily become so full, that breathing would be impossible.

"You've hit it," grinned Mariposa Marsh, but work lively, or them imps up yender may diskiver the smoke comin' out o' the other chimbley—an' then we *would* be gone up!"

A little ashamed of the petulance and distrust he had exhibited, Captain Cooper fell to work with redoubled energy, and as the earth was quite moist, enabling them to build it up in an almost perpendicular wall, ten minutes later saw all of the crevices closed so securely, that not a particle of smoke could enter the chamber.

"You kin take it a little easier, now," said Mariposa Marsh, when he ascertained this fact. "Still we want to double what we've done, fer them blankets mought come loose, an' then we would be wuss off than afore."

"While we're at work, suppose you tell us how all this is to end?" said Frank Freeman, brushing the drops of sweat from his heated brow. "I, for one, am getting both hungry and thirsty, and as we have neither food nor drink with us—"

"You shell hev plenty o' both afore many more hours," interposed Mariposa Marsh, seating himself and lighting his pipe. "Afore midnight, or you kin eat an' drink *me*!" laughing.

"Don't knock off work beca'se I do. I cain't talk an' do dirt-daubin' all to oncet. That wall must be made a heap thicker afore we kin call ourselves safe. You do the work an' I'll play boss."

There was a general laugh at this cool proposition, but no one thought of raising any objection. The veteran had already done his share, as all were agreed.

"One or two o' you boys climb up thar an' throw down the dirt from nigh the top. It'll save work in the eend. The rest kin tote it over an' stren'then the wall."

Mat and Harold hastened to obey this order, probably because they saw that a little harmless diversion might be mingled with the labor, but this idea was quickly driven out of their minds, and both lads uttered wondering cries.

"There's a hole up here, big enough for a man to crawl right in!" exclaimed Harold.

"An' big a-plenty fer him to crawl clean through, too," laughed Mariposa Marsh, openly enjoying the surprise and vivid curiosity of his comrades. "You fellers didn't surely think I was so big a fool as to run my head into a hole like this, onless I see a way o' gittin' out ag'in, right eend up'ards!"

There was no response made to this innocent bit o' sarcasm, for not one present but what had been guilty of the very thing which Mariposa Marsh affected to believe was impossible. They could see now how ridiculous were the doubts they had entertained, for no man of the veteran's clear wit and long experience would have sought refuge in a shaft without knowing how he was going to leave it.

Mariposa Marsh was well enough satisfied with the situation to refrain from pressing his advantage too hard, and after a quizzical grin toward Captain Cooper, he resumed:

"It all come 'long o' the habit I've got o' keepin' my eyes open an' makin' a mental note o' everythin' that passes around me. Only fer that, I reckon we'd be up yender 'mong the rocks, mighty hard pressed by Brimstone Bill an' his imps."

"You know we tried fire onto the two critters they sent down here to collect the gold. You ain't fergot, nuther, how quick we brung 'em to tarms; but thar was one other p'int I noticed, which none o' the rest o' ye 'peared to see, an' that was that hardy a smitch o' smoke kem back up the shaft."

"Now I knowed we'd made smoke enough to fill the hole chuck-full, an' that it hed got to go some'rs. So I looked around an' see it gradually creepin' up through a clump o' bushes an' bresh not fifty yards from whar we stood."

"Jest then the p'izen critters hollered enough, an' we hauled 'em up. Sense they was ketched I didn't say nothin' 'bout the smoke, but the knowledge stuck in my brain-pan, an' kem back to me when we diskivered sign o' the enemy."

"It was to make all things sure that I went down the hole fust, an' though I might not 'a' noticed the fact at any other time, or ef I hedn't seen the smoke actin' so, the minnit I sot foot in this chamber I felt a stiddy draught of air that told me whar to look fer the passage—the same the lads found jest now."

"Course I 'vestigated the matter, an' man-igged to worm my way clean through to the other shaft, though I found one o' two places whar I hed to squeege out 'most as thin as a sassidge afore I could make the ruffle. We'll hev to do some dirt-scratchin' afore we kin tote the gold through, I reckon."

"But suppose they notice the smoke the same as you did?"

"That's the one weak p'int in my 'rangements," frankly admitted the veteran. "But it'd be too much to expect everythin' in our favor. That don't often happen in raal life, an' we've got to run the chainces. I don't reckon, though, that thar's much danger. We closed up the hole an' cut off the draught so quick."

"You kin guess why I kep' so close-mouthed

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ontel we hed the passage fa'rly blocked up. Thar was a chaine of one o' our pris'ners givin' us the slip, an' ef I hed answered your questions, they'd 'a' blowed the hull thing—see?"

His audience *did* see, and realized the fact of his having pursued the wisest course; and Captain Cooper made ample amends for his petulant suspicions by the warm grasp which he gave the hand of the veteran.

"One o' you kin take charge o' the pris'ner—or, better still," added Mariposa Marsh, rising and knocking the ashes from his pipe bowl. "Tie his han's abind him, an' put a stopper in his mouth. 'Twon't do to run any onnecessary resks, an' a single yelp from his throat 'mought ruin everythin' when the time comes fer down-right, sober work."

Despite the protests of the outlaw, these orders were promptly executed.

"Now, then, while you fellers finish buildin' that mud wall, I'll take a crawl through the hole an' see what the prospects is," added Mariposa Marsh, leaving his rifle behind, but taking along his side-arms, in case of an emergency arising.

The veteran proceeded like one who knew he had an abundance of time to spare, and carefully guarded against making any sound that could alarm the most watchful enemy. As he drew near to the other extremity of the tunnel, his anxiety was redoubled, and for a few moments his heart throbbed suffocatingly, growing sick within him, for he believed that all had been discovered by the enemy!

In case the connection between the two shafts was discovered, or even suspected, he knew that their fate was indubitably sealed; that only death awaited them, either swift and speedy by the weapons of the bushrangers, or slow and terrible through starvation. Under the existing circumstances, half a dozen men, divided between the two shafts and working above-ground, could easily overmaster ten times their number below.

These fears were perfectly natural, for Mariposa Marsh saw that the light of day no longer shimmered down the shaft, and he believed the bushrangers had detected the rising smoke and covered the opening over, the more surely to suffocate their victims.

Still he continued his advance, and as he gained the end of the tunnel, an involuntary murmur of thankfulness escaped his lips, for his fears were not realized—the shaft was still open, though only a faint light came down the aperture.

The explanation was simple enough. Far more time had elapsed since their descent into the bowels of the earth than Mariposa Marsh had realized, and the shades of night were already settling over the valley without. Still, there was time enough and to spare, for not until the night had fairly set in could he venture to complete the difficult and delicate task he had set for himself.

Denying himself his pipe, lest the scent of the grateful weed should be detected by some keen-nosed enemy above ground, he settled down in a comfortable position near the edge of the shaft which, like the other one, descended far

below the level of the tunnel, and with his gaze riveted keenly upon the opening above, sought to ascertain whether or no the enemy had placed a guard over the entrance. Many minutes were passed thus without his hearing or seeing anything suspicious, when his attention was attracted by a sound in the narrow passage behind him.

It was too dark for eyesight to avail aught when looking away from the shaft, but the veteran was nothing alarmed, for he knew that none save a friend could thus draw near from that direction, and this belief was quickly confirmed by the appearance of Harold Freeman, bearing a message from Cooper.

"He didn't know what to make of your stopping away so long," began Harold, speaking in a low, guarded whisper. "He said tell you that the wall was built up some six feet in thickness, and that is more than is needed for safety. He wants to know what is to be done next."

"The road you come is got to be cl'ared out so the bags o' gold kin be toted through. Go back an' tell him he kin set to work, but not to rush it too fast. Thar's gobs o' time, ef he'll only think so. An' mind: ef I ain't here when he gits the hole cleaned out big enough, tell him he mustn't come, or let any o' the party come, within twenty-foot o' this shaft. Nur he mustn't let his lantern burn, out here. Now mind!"

Harold accurately repeated the instructions received, then vanished amid the gloom.

After a few minutes' waiting, Mariposa Marsh arose, satisfied that it was now dark enough outside for his purpose, and immediately set about his preparations for his adventure. These were simple enough, consisting in removing his heavy boots and laying aside all surplus articles, only retaining one loaded revolver and a knife.

The sides of the shaft were tolerably well lined with timbers, and nearly covered over with trailing vines which at the same time increased the facilities of ascent and the dangers, since they might at any time betray the reliance placed upon their strength and stability. But Mariposa Marsh had fairly weighed the risks he must run, and did not falter now.

Trusting his weight upon the vines, only after cautious but thorough tests, and then only in such places where he could not depend wholly upon the timbers, the veteran slowly but surely made his way toward the top, pausing frequently to detect, if possible, the first suspicion of danger. But as often was he agreeably disappointed, and again crept upward.

As he neared the mouth of the shaft, he began to catch the sound of human voices, but they all came from one direction, and were thus far most encouraging. Still he did not relax his prudence, and paused for several minutes with his head on a level with the opening before venturing to wholly emerge from the shaft. This he was enabled to do without danger of discovery, since the vine-clad bushes had partially overgrown the mouth of the shaft, extending for several yards around on every side, forming the best of cover, even under the light of the noonday sun.

By this time Mariposa Marsh was fully satisfied that the enemy had not the faintest suspicion that the two shafts were connected by an open tunnel, else a strong guard would have been placed around them both, even if the fire-cure was not brought into play. Hence he hesitated no longer about cautiously worming his way through the bushes and boulders until he secured a position from whence he could peer out upon the enemy.

Not more than forty yards of space divided him from the bushrangers, and as a large fire was burning brightly, not far from the mouth of the other shaft, he could study their faces and general appearance without any difficulty, at his leisure.

"Thirteen men—an' I don't reckon thar's any more," muttered Mariposa Marsh, after a careful examination of the bushrangers, who were gathered around the fire, eating their supper of kangaroo meat and "damper." "Nearly double our force, but I don't reckon thar's too many, ef we manidge things right. An' manidge it we will, too!"

The ruddy firelight brought out all the worst features of the baker's dozen of rascals, if anything intensifying their natural ferocity and criminal passions. All were heavily armed, stout, desperate men, who knew that they fought with a halter around their necks, which halter would assuredly perform its office were any of them taken alive. Such men are always dangerous, because they see no hope ahead.

Mariposa Marsh had scarcely finished his estimate of them, when he was startled to hear the neigh of a horse at no great distance from the camp fire, and though the fact seemed too good to be true, he believed that their stolen animals had been brought into the Gulch, no doubt for the purpose of bearing away the golden treasure of Spring Steel.

Keeping in the densest cover and making good use of the shadows as well, Mariposa Marsh crept around the bivouac and soon gained a point from whence he could count the animals as they cropped the nutritious grass beside the creek. Not a little to his delight he saw that none were missing, all eight being tethered close at hand, apparently none the worse for their unlawful trip in company with the bushrangers.

"That's settled, then, even ef thar were any doubt afore!" muttered Mariposa Marsh beneath his breath as he turned to retrace his steps. "The p'izen fools don't 'spect nothin', or they'd be less keerless, an' hev a guard set on the critters."

He found Captain Cooper and all the rest awaiting him when he descended and gained the tunnel.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WAY OUT OF THE LABYRINTH.

"WHAT next?" demanded the officer in a guarded whisper. "The passage is opened, and we've brought all the gold here. What is the next move? What did you find?"

"One question at a time, an' they'll last longer," retorted Mariposa Marsh, who appeared to find a peculiar pleasure in curbing the natural impetuosity of his old partner. "In the fust place, whar's the rope which we come down on?"

Frank handed him the coil, without a word.

"Now then, I want a stout yit actyve man," resumed the veteran, knotting one end of the rope around his waist as he spoke. "You, Bowen, 'll jist about fill the bill, pervided you kin bring yourself to take orders from anybody 'cept Cap."

"Do exactly as he bids you, Bowen," said Cooper, stiffly.

"Then take off your boots an' make ready to fol-ler me up the shaft," promptly added the veteran.

While Bowen was silently obeying the instructions given him by Mariposa Marsh, that worthy, seeing that the captain and others would require at least a partial explanation in order to act intelligently and in concert, condescended to speak more plainly.

"I'm goin' up yender to make a more thorough scout an' fix things in my mind so thar won't be no diffikilty when the time comes fer sober work. I'll take up this rope an' make one eend fast to the timbers above, or to a rock—anyway, fasten it so it won't give with the weight o' the biggest man in the comp'ny. To save time, Bowen 'll go 'long with me, fur as the mouth o' the shaft, an' when thar, 'll haul up the gold as you fellers tie 'em to the other eend o' the rope. They won't none o' you do no talkin', an' Bowen 'll be 'tick'larly keerful, sense ef them p'izen critters up yender gits wind o' what's goin' on afore we git all ready fer to give 'em ge-lory to t're ram! why, we'll git knocked on the head, sure's shootin'!"

"Then why run the risk of any further delay?" demanded Captain Cooper. "Why not all hands go up as soon as the rope is fixed, and leave the gold until the other job is done? The longer we wait, the greater risk there is of being discovered."

"I've got my reasons, mate, one o' which is that I never keer 'bout goin' off half-cocked," was the quiet, but resolute response. "It ain't goin' to be no fool of a job, the best way ye look at it, sence the p'izen critters outnumber us two to one. I won't run the resk o' strikin' a lick ontel I've got things all fixed to my likin'."

Captain Cooper knew that when Mariposa Marsh assumed that tone, he might as well try to whistle down the wind as to seek to alter his determination, and, though still chafing not a little at the unaccustomed position of subordination in which he all at once found himself, he lapsed into silence.

By this time Bowen was in readiness for the venture, but Mariposa Marsh bade him wait below until the rope was made fast above, when he could ascend with more ease and security. Like a perfectly-drilled automaton, the policeman accepted the change without a word of either dissent or approval.

Despite the fact of his having already passed over the ground twice, Mariposa Marsh found the feat even more dangerous and delicate than at first, owing to the intense gloom which now surrounded him, rendering the sense of eyesight almost useless. Still, he succeeded in gaining the top of the shaft in safety, without making noise enough to attract the attention of the enemy, whose voices he could hear, proceeding from the vicinity of the camp-fire, as though they still lingered over their evening meal.

"'Twon't be long afore you're laughin' out o' the other side o' your mouth, durn ye fer the p'izenest critters that ever trod the footstool!" muttered the veteran as he cautiously reared his tall figure high enough to peer through the tops of the vine-clad bushes upon his unconscious foemen.

It was plain to be seen that the bushrangers did not entertain the faintest suspicion of the truth. Their careless demeanor was evidence enough on that score. They believed their victims were securely imprisoned in the shaft, from which escape was impossible, unless in their very teeth, and the camp-fire was so arranged as to cast its brightest beams around the mouth of the shaft, making it so light that a mouse could not have emerged unseen.

But they no longer thought of any desperate sortie. They had flung enough blazing brands into the pit to roast a salamander, and they knew that no

human being could have so long endured that intense heat, even if the suffocating smoke had not been beforehand with the flames. Between the two, assuredly the bold but incredibly foolish treasure-seekers had met their deaths—thus the bushrangers reasoned.

Their careless attitudes, together with a few disconnected words that reached the ear of the veteran, told him all this as plain as words, and while assuring him that their surprise would be quite complete, were they given time to make the necessary arrangements, they also aroused a fresh and hitherto unthought-of source of peril in his mind.

"Thar's no 'pendin' on the doin's o' sech p'izen critters," he muttered beneath his breath as he sunk down and felt about for a secure point where he might fasten the rope. "Like's not the durned imps 'll be in too big a hurry to wait fer daylight, but 'll be sneakin' down the hole to see ef we're roasted to a turn! Ef they should, an' notice them blankets we hung up, thar'll be the devil to pay an' no pitch hot!"

If he could only have known it, Mariposa Marsh was borrowing unnecessary trouble on this score, though that very idea occurred to the bushrangers, and would have been put into execution ere this, only for one awkward fact, which necessitated delay. The liberal supply of blazing brands and dry logs which they had flung down the pit in order to make quick and sure work of a still dangerous enemy, had dried out the shores, sidings, props and other timbers used to protect the miners from being buried alive by the caving in of the side-walls, and these had caught fire. There was but little flame, though the interior of the shaft looked like a tube of red-hot iron, the timbers all aglow, rendering a descent out of the question for hours to come, if not an entire day and night.

But this fact was unknown to Mariposa Marsh, and lest the bushrangers should attempt a descent, he hurried up his preparations more than he would otherwise have deemed prudent. He soon secured the end of the rope, then signaled Bowen to come.

This was a work of time, for the worthy policeman was prudent enough when in cold blood, and had no wish to break his neck, if not all the bones in his body, by an involuntary trip to the bottom of the shaft; but a few moments later he gained the mouth of the pit in safety, and knelt beside Mariposa Marsh, awaiting his further instructions.

"Haul up the gold an' stow the sacks away 'mongst these bushes an' rocks, so you'll know whar to lay your han's on 'em in the dark, ef need be. Ef it's all done afore I git back, lay cluss whar you be, an' don't make noise enough to wake up a sleepin' weasel."

"You can depend upon my carrying out your orders to the very letter," replied Bowen respectfully.

"That's the way I like to hear a man talk," said Mariposa Marsh, approvingly. "Guess I'll hev to let 've off from that lickin' I promised ye, a few hours back. Steady, now!"

Bowen made no further response, and Mariposa Marsh glided noiselessly away through the line of bushes, pursuing the same course he had taken earlier in the evening.

The veteran was not acting aimlessly, but had an important end in view. He had already said enough to show that his intentions were to surprise the bushrangers, and by one well-directed volley, at least equalize their forces. He had enough experience in this irregular sort of warfare to know that if this could be done, it would be almost equivalent to a victory.

The bushrangers, bold and desperate though they undoubtedly were, would be utterly demoralized by such an unexpected assault, and their fears would naturally magnify the number of their assailants tenfold, when the chances were that the survivors would seek safety in flight without stopping to exchange a single blow with their hidden enemies.

Much, of course, depended upon the first blow, and it was to render this as certain as possible that Mariposa Marsh was running the risk of a second scout. The discovery made during his first venture, of the horses having been brought to the Gulch, rendered the projected surprise more difficult than it would otherwise have been, for obvious reasons. Their aid was essential in transporting the gold to a place of safety, but unless the ambuscade could be placed between the animals and the camp-fire, it was almost certain that some if not all of the horses would be pressed into service by the terror-stricken survivors as they fled from the spot of bloodshed and death.

This circuit would necessarily consume time, and be dangerous as well, since a single unguarded movement or false step might awaken the suspicions of the bushrangers, when the surprise would not only be incomplete, but the tables might be entirely turned.

Only for the absolute necessity of preserving the horses at all hazards, the affair would have been comparatively simple, since the second shaft was quite near enough to make every shot tell while the fire burned so brightly, and then a bold charge with revolver practice and plenty of yelling would almost certainly complete the job.

Mariposa Marsh made a rapid but thorough examination of the ground as he proceeded, once or twice turning back when he met with natural obstacles which would be difficult for his party to pass in the dark with the requisite degree of silence, and choosing a more favorable course, observing these precautions until he had made a half circuit around the camp-fire.

This carried him to a point midway between the horses and the bushrangers, where he was not a little gratified by finding a line of bushes and boulders extending at right angles, forming an admirable spot for an ambuscade.

Satisfied of this fact, Mariposa Marsh prostrated himself on his face and cautiously crawled nearer the unsuspecting enemy, keeping well covered, pausing only when not more than a dozen yards divided him from the camp-fire, while every word uttered was audible. The conversation was general, and naturally turned on the strange actions of the treasure-seekers in seeking refuge in the bowels of the earth, where their death was almost certain.

Apparently this point had been thoroughly discussed, for the general opinion appeared to be that the captain of the police had been so terrified by their approach as to lose what little coolness and wit he ever possessed, and under the influence of this panic, had blindly entered the trap which was already his grave.

Mariposa Marsh laughed heartily in his sleeve at these speeches, and pictured to himself the hot indignation of Captain Cooper when he retailed them, as he mentally vowed to do.

"If the infernal shaft hadn't caught fire," said one of the scoundrels, whom Mariposa Marsh judged, and correctly, was the leader of the gang, Brimstone Bill in person, "we could have wound up the job long before morning. There is a good heap of gold, but no more than enough to give us all a fair mouthful. If we stay here too long, some more of the bold boys may get wind of the affair, and come down out of the hills for a share of the plunder."

"All they git o' my sheer 'll come out o' my musket or 'volver!" growled one burly ruffian, and that he expressed the sentiments of the majority, was evident from the mutter of approval which followed his sanguinary speech.

"That of course," responded the chief. "But still, I'd rather avoid any trouble of that sort. I can stand a tolerable fair amount of fighting, as some of you can bear witness, when there is anything to be gained by it; but I don't relish the idea of fighting again for what we have already earned."

"It'll take a week for the cussed fire to burn out!"

"All of that if left to itself; but we can"

afford to wait that long. In the morning we'll drown the fire out. Luckily the creek is handy, and the job won't be a very heavy one."

"It's a job that's 'peared easy enough ever sence you tuck hold of it," observed another fellow, whose general appearance, together with his bandaged wounds, induced Mariposa Marsh to believe that he was one of the two men belonging to Greenhorn's gang who had managed to escape from the Gulch with life. "But I'm monstrous sorry we didn't ketch 'em all alive! It d 'a' made my hurts feel easier, an' my dead mates wouldn't 'a' slept any the less sound ef I could 'a' got the chainece to tortur' 'em a few hours or so, fu'st!"

"Your boss made an infernal botch of the whole job," bluntly retorted Brimstone Bill, unheeding the gross flattery of the wounded outlaw. "He was never intended to be anything higher than a sneak-thief or a spy. In those lines he was nearly perfect, but when he tried his hand at a higher cut of business, he played the ass in a lion's skin."

"It is just as well for you, Joe Damper and Hark-from-the-tombs, that he did make a botch of the affair, since we were on the lookout, an eye on each one of you."

"You had a spy in their camp, little thinking that at the same time your every motion was closely watched by my men, and that not a word was spoken among you but what it was brought to me before the breath had time to cool on your lips! We saw Captain Cooper and his men closing in around you, after knocking your single lookout on the head, and there was a time when we could have crushed the police at a single blow; but we suffered them to pass by, for reasons of our own. And yet, there is no particular reason why I should not be frank with you."

"My reasons for acting as I did are easily stated. In the first place, it is against my principles to pay a double price for any article which I may chance to covet, or to do work with my own hand when there are others ready to undertake the job at their own risk and expense, yet giving or suffering me to reap all the benefits of their labors."

"Of course I made up my mind to finger the golden treasure of Spring Steel, just as your party and that led by Captain Cooper did; but I had the advantage of being the dark horse in the race, besides having the inside track. I saw plain enough that you two would soon be at it, tooth and toenail, and as one man is easier whipped than two, we lay low until one-half the work was done to our hands."

"You, and Hark, yon ler, escaped the policemen and run into our party, which was another lucky hit in your favor, since you are now entitled to a half-share in the treasure, instead of an uneasy grave in the maw of some hungry dingo."

"We waited until the proper moment for action, then closed in on the victors of the first fight, losing only one foolhardy fellow in the skirmish, while making a clean sweep of the policemen. And that is why I said it was lucky for you that your chief made a botch of the affair, since what we have done for one party, we could and would have done for the other had chance given them the upper hand."

Mariposa Marsh had been induced by curiosity to await the conclusion of this long-winded explanation of Brimstone Bill's, since it promised to clear up several points which had occasioned him not a little perplexity; but time was passing rapidly, and he knew that his friends would be growing anxious, while he feared that the scanty stock of patience possessed by Captain Cooper would be unequal to the demand upon it.

"It'd be jest like the critter to take the bitt atween his teeth an' jump the inemy on his own hook," muttered the veteran betwixt his teeth as he slowly, warily backed away from his dangerous proximity to the enemy. "I know Frank, Mat an' Harold wouldn't listen to no sech fool move, but them two police fellers would foller the cap'n over a

thousan'-foot presserpice ef so be he once give them thar orders!"

Mariposa Marsh paused when once more at the line of bushes and boulders which he had selected as the place for forming his ambush, and seriously debated whether or no he should not make the best of his way back to the shaft at once.

"I would, only I hate to leave a job hafe-done. I must take a look at the critters, to make sure ef them imps hev thought best to set a man or two on guard over 'em. 'Fain't hardly likely, sence they feel so sure we're all roasted meat down at the bottom o' that hol'; but whar so much is at stake, only a fool runs any more chainences then he kin help. I'll take a scout 'round that way, an' ef mate is fool enough to make a break on his own hook, he'll be the main loser, for I'll draw off the youngsters, an' let the hot-headed critter whistle fer the gold he's so p'izen crazy over!"

When Mariposa Marsh once made up his mind to follow out a certain course, little short of death or an earthquake could turn him aside before the task he set himself was fairly accomplished. And now, the moment he reached the decision recorded above he cast aside all doubts concerning the prudence of Captain Cooper, and bent all his powers of both body and mind to solving the question which had arisen.

This presented no particular difficulties to one so skillful at creeping and crawling, when once he had gotten out of line with the fire, and keeping well covered by the natural protuberances, Mariposa Marsh did not require many minutes to ascertain the welcome fact that no guard had been placed over the horses by the bushrangers. This was especially fortunate, for had the contrary been the case, the veteran knew he would have to search for another cover in which to place his ambush.

"Nothin' could be seen from around the fire but from this side, it'd be mighty different! A blind man, ef his face chaineed to be turned to'rd that fire, couldn't help seein' us as we tuck persition. It's a mighty streak o' luck fer our side that they feel so safe!"

Mariposa Marsh lingered but little longer. He found Bowen on the alert, ready to receive him on his knife's point in case he should prove to be one of the enemy, and guardedly whispered to him:

"How's work? Got all the gold up yit?"

"Yes; nearly half an hour ago."

"Good enough! I've done my part, too, an' inside another hafe-hour, we'll all hev exercise enough to limber us all up. Draw back a little, an' let me go down."

Mariposa Marsh grasped the rope and slid down it.

"I reckon you all was growin' onpatient," he said, with a grim chuckle, cutting short the eager questioning of his friends. "But it's a big job we're tacklin', an' everythin' 'pends on our gettin' a good ready afore we enter onto it."

"Fu'st, one word to you, youngster: Ther must-n't be no sech foolishin' as you showed when we tackled the other gang. Ther's thirteen ag'inst seven, an' each one o' us must make sure an' throw his meat cold at the fu'st shot."

"We understand that," quietly replied Frank. "Captain Cooper has been telling us some of the crimes committed by this Brimstone Bill, and you will find us all ready to shoot straight whenever you give the word."

"Good enough! Now listen to what we've got to do."

CHAPTER IX.

THE GOLDEN TREASURE WON AT LAST.

"As I said afore, thar's jest thirteen men, while we kin only count up seven, at the best, but ef you all kerry out the part that falls to your sheer, we kin lick 'em!"

"In the fu'st place, we want to git up to the top o' the shaft, then I'll lead the way, you follerin' me in

Injun file, an' movin' as keeful as though you was walkin' on thin ice over a bottomless pit o' b'ilin' sulphur an' brimstone—see?"

"A beautiful and appropriate simile—go on!" murmured Captain Cooper, with a faint smile.

"I never hed the pleasure o' meetin' the Simmy Lee you speak of, so I cain't say whether he was beautiful or not, nur I don't keer a continental," equably retorted Mariposa Marsh. "Them as hain't got no vein o' poetry runnin' through thar comper-sition, shouldn't make no remarks when one that chainces to be a little better favored by natur', sorter slings on the style, in a graceful manner, like. But this ain't business.

"I've picked out a lovely spot fer to spring our andbush from, 'bout hafe-way between the hoss-critters an' the fire whar the men-imps hes hunkered down fer the night. We kin git thar easy enough, without rousin' any 'spicion, ef we take keer in settin' our huffs down; an' then we kin knock over the biggest hafe o' the miscreants afore they know that the trump o' doom is crackin'. Then we'll out 'volvers an' break kiver, each man whoopin' an' yellin' like he was a hull tribe o' drunken Injuns on a t'ar an' bound fer to play cirkis. See?"

"No doubt you have devised the best plan under existing circumstances, and the sooner we set about bringing it to a finish the better," observed Captain Cooper, then adding for the benefit of the three youngsters: "Remember what I told you about Brimstone Bill and his gang of murdering cut-throats. Their lives have been justly forfeited by a thousand brutal outrages, and it is no more sin to shoot them down without warning than it would be to slay a wolf whose jaws were buried in the throat of an innocent and helpless lamb!"

"Pears like poetry is ketehin'," commented Mariposa Marsh, with an oily chuckle.

"We understand what is expected of us, and if we fail, 'twill not be for want of determination to do our duty," quietly replied Frank Freeman, as usual speaking for Harold and Mat, as well as for himself.

"Then everythin' is settled 'cept one p'int, which is the most 'portant of all," added Mariposa Marsh, seriously. "Thar kin be only one leader in this job, an' sarcumstances hev already 'cided that should be me, sence I know the lay o' the ground best. Thar mustn't be no axin' questions or arguin' 'bout any p'int that may or may not be ordered all fer the best. Each man must do jest what he is told. We kin argue the p'int after the work is done, but it won't answer to do it afore."

"That's a hit at me," said Cooper, with a pleasant laugh, "but I assure you, old mate, that you need borrow no uneasiness on that score. All I want is work—the more the better—and I have full confidence in your ability to carry out what you have so well begun. From this on, my name is Silent Obedience!"

Mariposa Marsh saw that the officer meant every word he uttered, and was not a little relieved thereat. Cooper had shown such a grumbling, fault-finding spirit ever since the Gulch was reached, that he feared further trouble from him.

"Then I don't see as thar is anything more to say or settle. When we git up above, you tell Bowen to fall right in ahind you, an' to do jest as you do. He won't ax to know more."

Mariposa Marsh grasped the rope and began his ascent of the shaft, which was quickly accomplished, thanks to this assistance. Then, giving the signal for the next man to follow, he pressed into the bushes and eagerly gazed out upon the gang of bushrangers.

A few seemed to be sleeping, but Brimstone Bill and the majority were still smoking their pipes and talking, as though they intended to pass the remainder of the night thus.

"Make the most o' your time, ye imps o' perdition!" muttered the veteran, nodding viciously toward his enemies. "That is the last pipe you'll ever

smoke—fer whar you're goin' 'bacco don't grow, or ef it did, it'd scorch up afore you could crowd it into a pipe-bowl!" with a grin at his grim conceit.

Ten minutes sufficed for all of the party to ascend the shaft by means of the rope, and then, satisfied that everything was in readiness, Mariposa Marsh touched Cooper by way of warning, and crouching low down, led the way along the route he had marked out so carefully in his memory, moving slowly in order to insure perfect silence.

Thanks to the precautions he had taken during his two scouts, this was no difficult matter, even for those who were now passing over the ground for the first time.

Though all the way was under cover, made doubly efficient by the intense darkness, the trail was a fairly open one, and as each one of the party realized the full extent of the peril they would incur in case the suspicions of the bushrangers were awakened, they exercised the utmost caution, and not a sound betrayed their progress.

Ten minutes of this stealthy advance brought Mariposa Marsh to the spot which he had chosen for his ambuscade, and pausing at the nearest end, he signed for Cooper to halt.

"This is your position," he uttered in a guarded whisper. "You'll spot that big feller with the black haird an' blue shirt. Wait fer the word, then make sure o' your meat!"

The captain made no response other than by kneeling down and pushing the muzzle of his rifle forward, keeping his eyes fixed on the bushranger indicated as his special target.

In a like manner Mariposa Marsh posted each one of the party, giving each his mark, thus making sure that two bullets should not be wasted upon the same enemy.

All this consumed some little time, but as the bushrangers seemed fairly settled down for the night, this mattered but little. Above all else, it was essential that there should be no mistake about the first blow, since victory or defeat depended upon its thoroughness.

But when Mariposa Marsh had assumed his own position, he was quite at ease, and felt not the slightest doubt of the result. His plans had been so carefully formed, and the preliminaries so admirably carried out, that there was hardly any probability of their failure.

As yet not a weapon had been cocked, for upon that still night air, such a sound would surely tell the bushrangers that trouble was brewing. But this fact did not trouble Mariposa Marsh. He knew that every one of his comrades were experts with their firearms, and would find no difficulty in cocking their weapons and covering their men with one and the same motion, so quickly that, even if alarmed, the enemy would not have time to arise, much less offer any organized resistance, before the volley was fired.

Touching Harold, who was stationed next him on his right, Mariposa Marsh bade him pass the word along for all to be in readiness, then, after a brief pause, he cried aloud:

"Fire! Don't let one o' the p'izen critters escape!"

But only the first word was heard by either the bushrangers or his own party.

As a single gun, seven rifles were cocked, then flrought to bear upon the already selected victims, the concluding words of the sentence being drowned by the heavy explosion.

The bushrangers caught the command to fire, but ere they could fairly realize its purport, over one half their number fell, either dead or mortally wounded. Brimstone Bill was among the number. Mariposa Marsh had reserved that worthy for his own rifle, and the notorious criminal died where he sat, a bullet through his brain.

"Out an' at 'em!" screamed Mariposa Marsh, dropping his rifle and drawing a revolver as he broke cover. "Shoot to kill! Don't let one git away!"

Give the p'izen imps the same kind o' quarter they thought to give us—down with 'em!"

His pistol was quite as busy as his tongue, and punctuated every sentence, while the others were none the less earnest in their onset, their blood fairly boiling.

The massacre—for indeed it was no better, since not one of the bushrangers was given time to draw a weapon or fire a shot—was over almost as soon as begun. Only three of the thirteen stout men rose to their feet, and these were shot down before they could pass beyond the circle of firelight in their vain attempt to flee. Never was a surprise more complete, or more thoroughly improved!

Their short-lived fury over, the three boys stood gazing upon the bloody scene in which they had played such a prominent part, their cheeks growing pale, their hearts turning sick within their bosoms, their better natures strongly revolting.

"'Twas only an act of common justice," said Mariposa Marsh, observing their emotions and drawing near them, leaving Captain Cooper and his men to make sure that none of the bushrangers had or could make their escape. "You mustn't look on them as human creatures, for they had forfeited all claims on humanity by numberless crimes and deeds of ruthless atrocity. Not one among them but what had committed murder, and even worse. You remember the report we heard of that family—the Havens? This man, Brimstone Bill, and his gang committed that dastardly crime. Think of what those poor women endured before death came to their relief, and then remember that this night you have helped to avenge them—as far as killing such demons can avenge."

"No doubt they richly deserved their fate," said Frank, speaking with difficulty, "but none the less do I regret my share in the bloody deed. I shall be glad when we can leave Australia—there seems to be blood in the very air we breathe."

"Waal, we won't be gray-headed afore we turn our backs on the p'izen kentry," said Mariposa Marsh, lapsing into his customary uncouth manner of speaking. "We've made gold enough on this speckilation to keep us comfortable without hard work fer a spell, an' I reckon we won't stop long this side o' old America—the land o' all lands, when the bull's told!"

"But we've got more work to do, ef we want to git out o' this p'izen trap afore day. You youngsters kin go an' see ef all is right with the boss-critters."

The lads gratefully availed themselves of this excuse for departing from the ghastly scene of bloodshed and death, immediately leaving the lighted space.

Meanwhile Captain Cooper was characteristically engaged, having found one of the bushrangers still alive, though all could see that he was death-doomed. From this wretch the police officer, by dint of threatening to hang him out of hand, was obtaining the names, real or assumed, of each one of the dead bushrangers, coolly jotting them down in his note-book as the basis of an official report. Bowen and his mate were dragging forward the slain, one by one, for identification, then callously pitching them down the still glowing shaft, as the most speedy method of getting rid of an eyesore.

"Even if we had failed in our search for the treasure of Spring Steel," said Captain Cooper, arising and carefully stowing away his note-book as a painful gurgle in the throat of the dying bushranger told him that no further information could be gleaned from those lips, "this would not have been a bad night's work, peculiarly speaking. One hundred pounds for the death of each bushranger, besides over three thousand pounds of special rewards which I can sum up from memory! It will make a glorious report, and not only that, but it will furnish an admirable excuse for our expedition. No one will have any thoughts or suspicion of the greatest stroke we have made."

"Of course it all comes in the way o' your trade," said Mariposa Marsh, speaking a little more coldly than was his way when addressing his mate, "but fer all that, I'd rather made my livin' some other way. Head-money is poor gold to my notion."

"Intercourse with those lads has somewhat unsettled your stomach, old friend," said Cooper, with a laugh. "But come; we will not quarrel about an empty idea. To tell you the truth, I am not in love with the life myself, and if we once get our treasure safe and sound, I mean to resign my commission. I will go out in a blaze of glory, anyway! No other officer can boast of as good a showing in a single season. Three gangs of bushrangers, including Spring Steel and Brimstone Bill!"

"Don't crow too loud afore you're clean out o' the woods," dryly uttered the veteran. "That report ain't handed in yet, an' mebbe it never 'll be. These pesky hills an' hollers seem to be chuck-full o' the p'izen bushrangers an' sich-like varmints, an' we may be called upon to flax out a couple dozen or two more afore all's done. Thar's no dead-sure thing 'bout it."

"No doubt we could do it, with you to lay the plans for us," added Captain Cooper, with a cordial laugh, "but all the same, I prefer resting on the laurels already won. Enough is enough, but too much is a plenty, as I've heard you say."

"An' truer words was never spoken then them same! But we're talkin' when we should be at work. We want to git that gold packed up an' skin out o' here afore any more two-legged wolves smell out the rich bait!"

"True enough. Let us once get fairly outside, where we will have plenty of room to maneuver in, and I don't care how many of your wolves come snarling around our heels. We have plenty of medicine that is a sure cure for their diseases!"

Captain Cooper appeared to be in an unusually loquacious mood, and lest he should go on talking away the precious moments that had far better be spent in work, Mariposa Marsh turned aside to seek out the boys, who were busily engaged in preparing the animals for the road.

Cooper understood this silence, and bade his two followers bring forth the packages containing the golden treasure of Spring Steel, while he searched for the stout canvas sacks which he had provided for the purpose of carrying back the gold, in case the information contained in the secret cipher should prove correct. These were readily discovered where they had been dropped when the treasure-seekers began their advance on the band under command of Greenhorn, and into them were stowed the smaller sacks of nuggets and dust.

During all this time not one of the party had given a thought to the prisoner whom they had left behind in the tunnel; but at this juncture Mariposa Marsh remembered his existence, and bidding the youngsters stand ready to receive the fellow, he took the dark-lantern and once more descended the shaft. Here a truly startling surprise awaited him, for the outlaw was not to be seen.

Close by the mouth of the tunnel lay the thongs which had confined his arms, still knotted, which the cunning rascal had evidently slipped over his hands.

Though Mariposa Marsh felt pretty well convinced that the fellow had escaped them by means of the rope which still hung down the shaft, he cocked a revolver and made a thorough inspection of the tunnel, only to have his fears confirmed.

This was an additional reason for their making all possible haste in leaving the dangerous precincts of Dead Man's Gulch, not that the one man by himself was to be dreaded, but there was a probability of his speedily falling in with another gang of bushrangers, whose cupidity would be set on fire by the tale he could tell of the marvelous treasure, and Mariposa Marsh cared for no more fighting on that score if it could possibly be avoided. Rapidly as

cending the shaft he made known this important discovery, urging all hands to swifter work.

The adventurers were eager enough to leave the blood-stained spot without this incentive, and while the sacks of gold were being packed on the horses, Captain Cooper sought out the spot where the policeman had fallen in the rash charge which he himself had started. The luckless fellow lay as he had fallen, and after a brief hesitation the captain raised the body in his arms and bore it to a deserted shaft, then dropped it down.

The deed appeared a cold-blooded one, but after the first moments of repulsion, even the three lads saw that it was the wisest course after all. The body could not well be transported to where it might receive Christian burial, nor would it rest any the less easy at the bottom of that deep shaft than in a shallow grave, such as they would be able to form with the limited means at their command.

"He was a Roman Catholic, and I will take care to have masses said for the repose of his soul," uttered Captain Cooper, himself a Protestant, as far as he dabbled in religion at all. "Could he have spoken he would have made no objection, for he was ever a generous, accommodating fellow. Anyway our first duty is owing to the living, and since that rascal has given us the slip, we will be in danger until we leave this death-trap many miles behind us."

If all parties were not fully satisfied with this reasoning, at least they did not raise any audible objections, since such would plainly be useless. The deed was done, nor could it be altered, even had they so desired.

The sacks of gold were firmly secured behind the saddle of each horse, a double quantity being placed on the extra animal, of which Bowen took charge. Then, each man leading his own allotted beast, the little band slowly wound their way up the steep slope, leaving the Gulch, which now doubly deserved the grim appellation it had received years before, behind them with feelings which contained anything but regret.

Mariposa Marsh instinctively assumed the lead, nor did Captain Cooper, for a wonder, feel the faintest trace of jealousy at his doing so. For the time being he would not have grumbled at having his rank superseded by an infant-in-arms!

Ever since entering the force, like the great majority of those who served in the land of gold, he had constantly dreamed of one day making his fortune at a single stroke, and not without ample precedent. But little of the many treasures found by those whose business it was to hunt down and exterminate the bushrangers, was ever accounted for to the Government, until universal custom gradually grew to be recognized as an actual, if not a regular, law. Thus the doughty captain felt no conscientious scruples against appropriating the treasure discovered to his own and partners' use, even while he knew that if such a discovery was openly blazoned abroad, the iron hand of the Government would descend upon it, despite his imaginary rights as finder, or the peculiar document held by Mariposa Marsh.

Upon this point, his brain was very busy during that night's ride, but when the new day had fairly dawned, and they came to a halt for the double purpose of breathing their animals and breaking their own fast, upon the scanty supply of provisions brought from Dead Man's Gulch, he had matured a plan by which he hoped all trouble might be averted, and to which he readily obtained Mariposa Marsh's consent.

Spring Steel's treasure was to be passed off as the result of an extraordinarily rich "find" made by Mariposa Marsh and his young allies.

Doubts of the truth of this statement might, and probably would, be entertained, but no objections could be raised of sufficient force to prevail against their united testimony.

Lest the smaller sacks in which the gold was contained should betray the real facts, it was resolved to spend a day, when fairly away from the Gulch, in partially curing the hide of the led-horse, which should be butchered for that purpose, making bags of the hide, into which the gold should be packed, carefully burning the original envelopes.

This plan was duly carried out, and it may be stated here that perfect success attended the cunning ruse.

Whatever may have been thought, no doubts were openly expressed even when Captain Cooper shortly afterward tendered his resignation and retired forever from public life as an officer of the Colonial Mounted Police Service.

From the hour when they left Dead Man's Gulch fairly behind them, all went well with our friends, they not encountering a peril or meeting with an adventure worthy especial note during the long journey to the city of Melbourne.

Once there, their first move was to deposit the golden treasure of Spring Steel in the bank, to the credit of "Tobias Marshall, Esquire," after which Cooper made out his report and tacked on to it his resignation, while the others were patronizing the barber and tailor, all meeting for supper at the hotel.

And then, when hunger was appeased, Mariposa Marsh electrified them by saying:

"Gentlemen, I want you all to accompany me while I go to claim my daughter, Miss May Brady!"

CHAPTER X.

SETTLING ALL ACCOUNTS.

WHAT consumed a long time in telling and explaining, may be condensed into a very few paragraphs, without detriment to the interest of the story.

Tobias Marshall, for that was his rightful name, was an American of good birth, education and prospects when he married an Englishwoman after a brief courtship.

Unluckily for their future happiness, madam was fond of admiration, rather weak and silly, though there was no positive evil in her nature.

It was the old, old story. A foolish wife, playing with fire; a jealous, hot-tempered husband who suspected far more than the truth; an idle man of fashion who sought the ruin of what might have been a happy home.

Mr. Marshall was also a father, their one child being named May, from the month in which it was born, and was barely a year old when the catastrophe occurred.

The jealous husband reproached his wife for her flirting propensities, she retorted, and the end was that she, woman-like, declared that she would no longer live with such a tyrant, but would leave him and return home to her mother.

This threat had been made so often that it had lost its original terrors, and Mr. Marshall left the city on important business, being absent a week or more, returning to find that his wife had taken their child and embarked for England.

This alone would have been bad enough, but an over-officious friend hastened to tell him that the man of fashion who had danced attendance on Mrs. Marshall so long and closely, was also a passenger, and had been seen in close converse with the lady as the vessel departed.

Of course Marshall followed them. He overtook them in London, watched his chance, found them together, surprised and accused them, then ended by tossing the fellow out of the second-floor window, breaking his neck on the paving below.

Cursing his wife, he fled and baffled pursuit, giving himself up from that time to the roughest, wildest life he could find, only learning the truth when he encountered his daughter, May, in the charge of Judge Brady, whom he recognized as the uncle of his wife.

Before entering upon that perilous search for the

golden treasure of Spring Steel, Tobias Marshall made himself and his claims known to Judge Brady, who gave quite as great a surprise as he himself had received.

He declared that himself and wife were on the vessel that Mrs. Marshall had so rashly embarked in; that she was not attended by the would-be seducer, though his voyage was doubtless undertaken with a view to compromise her, and thus pave the way to ultimate success.

Judge Brady solemnly vouched for his innocence of actual sin, both then and thereafter.

The wild charges of the jealous husband gave Mrs. Marshall a terrible shock from which she never fully recovered, and when all efforts to find Marshall failed, she gradually declined in health until death closed all accounts.

Judge Brady went to Australia, hearing that the husband had been recognized there, but without finding him. Entering business, he raised little May as his own child, as she was led to believe herself, and though he did not deny the rights of the real father, he begged for time to gently and by degrees break the strange tidings to her.

In compliance with this desire, Tobias Marshall purchased the right to seek for the golden treasure of Spring Steel, and now that the specified period had expired, was about to claim his daughter.

Judge Brady had faithfully performed his disagreeable duty, and as "Mariposa Marsh" when dressed up and personally cared for was a really fine-looking man of middle age, May did not find the task of loving him as difficult as she had anticipated.

Of all that followed the imagination of the kind reader can spare pen and ink the trouble of detailing in full.

Enough that the lads on this occasion, being better prepared to encounter those roguish glances and soft speeches, acquitted themselves admirably; that "Mariposa Marsh" gracefully assumed the duties of a father; that Captain Cooper was as pleased as the best of them, for his long-cherished dream had become a reality, and he was already planning a trip across the ocean with them all—for Judge Brady and his wife declared that they could not altogether lose their daughter—But why continue?

Enough that Frank Freeman, when he attained his majority, also gained a true and loving wife, while May was often heard to declare that never was there another husband to equal the one she found in the far-away bush of Australia!

THE END.

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